CHILDREN OF EARTH

ALICE BROWN

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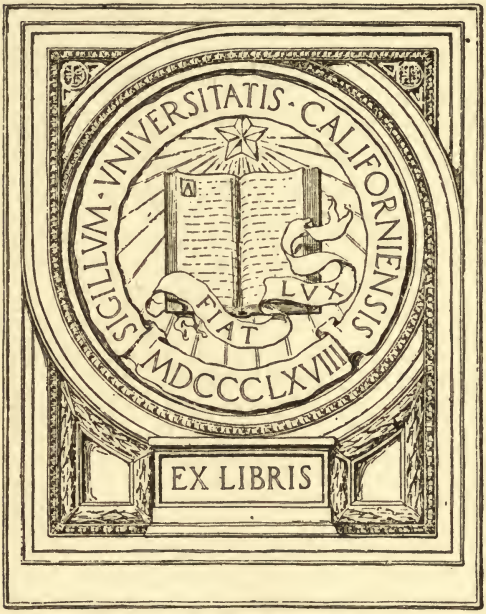

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BOOKS BY ALICE BROWN

My Love and I.
The Secret of the Clan.
Vanishing Points.
Robin Hood's Barn.

PUBLISHED BY
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

CHILDREN OF EARTH

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MARY ELLEN

MISS EFFIE SHANNON

CHILDREN OF EARTH

A Play of New England

BY

ALICE BROWN

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1915

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English Alumnus

TO VIM
AMICITIAE

CHILDREN OF EARTH

THE AMERICAN PRIZE PLAY

In 1913 a prize of $10,000 was offered by Winthrop Ames for the best play, to be submitted anonymously, by an American author. Nearly seventeen hundred manuscripts were received; and in June, 1914, the judges, Augustus Thomas, Adolph Klauber and Winthrop Ames, awarded the prize to "Children of Earth" by Alice Brown. On January 12, 1915, Mr. Ames produced the play at The Booth Theatre, New York.

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PROGRAMME OF THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

WINTHROP AMES

PRESENTS

CHILDREN OF EARTH

A Play of New England

By ALICE BROWN

THE PEOPLE OF THE PLAY

MARY ELLEN BARSTOW . . Miss Effie Shannon
AARON BARSTOW (her brother)
Mr. Herbert Kelcey
ANITA BARSTOW (Aaron's daughter)
Miss Olive Wyndham
PETER HALE . . . . . Mr. A. E. Anson
JANE HALE (Peter's wife) . . Miss Gilda Varesi
ADAM HALE (Peter's cousin) . Mr. Theodor von Eltz
NATHAN BUELL . . . . . Mr. Reginald Barlow
UNCLE EPH GROUT . . . . Mr. Cecil Yapp
CYNTHIA COLEMAN . . . . Mrs. Kate Jepson

People of the Village

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY

ACT I.—Mary Ellen Barstow's Sitting Room. An Afternoon in Spring.

ACT II.—The Hale Farm. The Same Afternoon.

ACT III.—Pine Tree Spring. Daybreak the Next Morning.

ACT IV.—The Barstow Sitting Room.

The Play Produced by Winthrop Ames

To

WINTHROP AMES

WHO "STILL BETTERS WHAT IS DONE"

IN PLAYS AND ACTING

PERSONS AND SCENES OF THE PLAY

MARY ELLEN BARSTOW.
AARON BARSTOW, *her brother.*
ANITA BARSTOW, *Aaron's daughter.*
PETER HALE.
JANE HALE, *his wife.*
ADAM HALE, *Peter's cousin.*
NATHAN BUELL.
UNCLE EPH GROUT.
CYNTHIA COLEMAN.

ACT I.—Mid-afternoon in Spring. The Barstow Sitting Room.

ACT II.—A Little Later the Same Afternoon. The Dooryard of Mill Road Farm.

ACT III.—Daybreak the Next Morning. Pine Tree Spring.

ACT IV.—The Same Morning a Little Later. The Barstow Sitting Room.

ACT I

CHILDREN OF EARTH

ACT I

Mid-afternoon of a spring day in the sitting room of a New England colonial house, furnished in keeping with excellent, though plain, old-fashioned furniture. There are two windows, with folding shutters, looking out on the front yard and the path that goes down to the road. There is a door opening into the front hall, a door into the passageway serving as a pantry, leading into the kitchen, and a door into a bedroom. The room is wainscoted, and over the large fireplace, with its Hessian firedogs, the wall is paneled, with two little cupboards above the mantel, one on each side. On the mantel are old brass candlesticks, a tall vase of lilacs, daguerreotypes, etc. Between the windows is an old-fashioned desk with secretary top (the shelves filled with books) and near it a small round table, on it a tall vase of spring flowers. Between the hall door and the door to the kitchen is a sideboard, and above it are shelves, the upper ones filled with china and the lowest with pewter. There are four chairs drawn up to the large square dining table in the middle of the room, and these, like

the other chairs, are of a simple antique pattern. There is a grandfather clock, and, on the wall, a colored print. There are braided rugs, and at the windows soft white curtains.

AARON BARSTOW, *a man of fifty-two, sits at the desk, rapidly examining papers, tearing them and tossing them into the waste-basket at his side. The papers are in neat packets, as if they had been carefully put away, but he tears them ruthlessly, as one used to more important work. He is a hard-featured, self-contained man, of a sharp, concentrated glance and a prompt, masterful manner. He is not a man of initiative who could govern new situations intuitively. He has learned to control one sort of business and put all his force in there, sometimes with the outlay of an inordinate amount of energy. For though he is a city manufacturer, he has never ceased to be a country man—the type you see passing the plate in a country meeting house—canny, not humorous, limited, and taking back every time to old ideas.*

ANITA, *carrying a pile of men's clothing, comes in from the front hall. She is a charming girl, with all the modern graces and a lovely warmth and simplicity of nature sometimes crossed by a streak of hardness where she has been obliged to revolt against father and his ways. She wears a blue dress of a fashionable cut, though quite simple, as her sense of fitness has prescribed. She carries the clothes to the large table and drops them on it with a manifest air of distaste.*

AARON

That you, Nita?

ANITA

Yes. Come, look at these. [*As he pays no attention.*] Father!

AARON

[*Looking round.*]

What ye got there?

ANITA

Grandfather's clothes.

AARON

Well, they won't bite ye.

ANITA

I've caught it of Aunt Mary Ellen. She can't bear to touch them.

AARON

Say so?

ANITA

No. But you can see. It's all been too much for her. He was sick so long. And then the funeral. And we let her go through it alone.

AARON

We couldn't ha' got here for the services if we'd sailed as soon as she cabled.

ANITA

We needn't have stayed three weeks after.

AARON

I was more or less busy, you may remember.

ANITA

Buying rubber.

AARON

[*With a dry jocularity.*]
You were more or less busy yourself.

ANITA

Buying clothes. We were quitters, that's all.

AARON

Oh, come, come.

ANITA

We simply left Aunt Mary Ellen to take care of that helpless old man. I don't believe you've been down here once a year since mother died. I haven't.

AARON

Well, we're here now.

ANITA

Yes, and in the three hours we've been here, I can see we're too late to be any help.

AARON

What you goin' to do with them?

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen wants to know whether you can wear them. I suppose she thinks they're nice, poor dear.

[*She holds up a waistcoat to examine it.*]

AARON

Tell her to give 'em away. Godfrey! don't that look like father! Threadbare!

ANITA

Are those his papers?

AARON

Yes. Worthless. Little picayune things.

ANITA

What are you in such a hurry for, to clear them out?

AARON

Gettin' things to rights. So your aunt can go back with us.

ANITA

You don't mean—to live?

AARON

Course I do.

ANITA

She wouldn't know what do with herself.

AARON

She'll be company for you. Do what your mother'd done, if she'd lived.

ANITA

She doesn't dream of leaving here.

AARON

No. I ain't told her yet.

[CYNTHIA COLEMAN *bursts in from the front hall. She is a large woman, between forty and fifty, of abounding good-nature and a perennial gush of words. She wears her best suit, the one she keeps "for nice".*]

CYNTHIA

There! I bolted right in. Aaron Barstow, this ain't you?

AARON

Well, what d'ye think?

CYNTHIA

I see you drive by. Well, it's a kind of a sad home-comin', ain't it, your father passed away 'n' all. This your girl?

AARON

Anita, this is Mis' Coleman,—Mis' Cynthy Coleman.

CYNTHIA

[*Shaking hands with Anita.*]

Favors your side, don't she? She's the exact image o' Mary Ellen at her age.

ANITA

I'll call Aunt Mary Ellen. She's changing her dress.

CYNTHIA

Don't ye disturb her. I'm on my way home from the street, an' I stopped to put a question, that's all. What time's the exercises down to Mill Road Farm?

AARON

Exercises?

CYNTHIA

Jane'll know. I see her through the kitchen winder.

AARON

Jane? Who's Jane?

CYNTHIA

Why, Jane Hale. Peter Hale's wife.

AARON

What's she in the kitchen for? I didn't see anybody come in.

CYNTHIA

Why, she's been comin', off an' on, ever since your father had his stroke. Lately she's stayed nights an' got breakfast. I dunno what Mary Ellen'd done without her an' Peter.

AARON

Peter Hale? So he's got back here. He was the wanderin' one, wa'n't he?

CYNTHIA

Yes.

AARON

Where'd he pick this woman up? Round here?

CYNTHIA

Law, no. She's a Portugee. But she's mad as fire if anybody says she ain't straight Yankee. [*Amused.*] Calls herself Jane.

ANITA

Peter Hale? Is that Adam Hale's cousin?

CYNTHIA

Yes. It's down to his farm we're goin' to bless the trees. Mill Road Farm.

AARON

Blessin' the trees? What kind o' folderol is that?

CYNTHIA

Oh, you come along an' see. Peter Hale's been learnin' us the songs, 'n' we're goin' to all turn out. Many's there is left of us. Mary Ellen's bought up so much o' the farm land round here she's kinder crowded us off the edge, an' we're movin' into the village. I'm packing up an' I expect to be off next week.

[*She calls in a clarion voice directed to the kitchen.*]

Jane!

AARON

Well, I s'pose 'twas to your advantage to sell, or ye wouldn't ha' sold.

CYNTHIA

Law! I'm goin' to be proper pleased to move into the street amongst folks. I guess 'twas so with the rest. We're all gittin' along in years an' the young folks are possessed to be off bein' *chauf*fers or climbin' electric poles.

[*She calls again.*]

Jane! [*To Aaron.*] Much as I can do to get anybody to help me pack up.

[JANE HALE *comes in from the kitchen. She is a thin, pale, haggard woman, in the forties, of a tempestuous type, subdued to the demands of everyday life. Her black eyes, often veiled, are, in spite of her, hot with the tropical fire she is able, for the most part, to keep out of her manner. Although she is capable of lithe action, her ordinary movements are dull and peasant-like.*]

JANE

How de do, Mis' Coleman.

CYNTHIA

Make you acquainted with Mr. Aaron Barstow, from New York—Mary Ellen's brother. Miss Anita Barstow.

ANITA

[*Coming forward with a pretty manner of being "nice" to Jane.*]

Mrs. Coleman says you've been helping Aunt Mary Ellen, you and your husband.

JANE

Yes. I'm here more'n I am to home—now. He says she hadn't ought to be alone.

CYNTHIA

What time's the exercises down to the farm?

JANE

Four o'clock.

CYNTHIA

[*Turning to go.*]

You come down, Aaron. Renew your youth.

JANE

Mis' Coleman, I've got a basket o' Mary Ellen's dishes she's goin' to lend us. Could you make room for it in the buggy?

CYNTHIA

Certain I could.

JANE

Peter's goin' to call for it, but he'll have the colt an' I wouldn't resk it.

[*She goes out to the kitchen.*]

CYNTHIA

Better by half come down, Aaron. We used to have proper good times down to Mill Road Farm.

AARON

Look here, Cynthy, I shall have to take that 6.20 to-morrer mornin', for New York. You don't s'pose you could carry me to the depot, do ye?

CYNTHIA

Why, yes. Some of us'll be glad to.

AARON

That depot man's slower'n stockstill.

CYNTHIA

Right on hand, ain't you, Aaron, same's you always was?

AARON

Well, ye've got to be if you're goin' to git anywheres.

[*Jane comes in from the kitchen with a large basket of china.*]

CYNTHIA

I'll help ye. Here, let me ketch hold.

AARON

I'd offer to take that for ye, but I dunno but you can manage it better by yourselves.

[*Cynthia and Jane carry out the china by the hall door.*]

[*Aaron watches them out and then goes on with his "regulating".*] I don't like the looks o' that Hale woman.

ANITA

So that's Peter Hale's wife. But she's been good to Aunt Mary Ellen. What's she so long about?

[*She goes to the bedroom door and knocks, calling.*]

Aunt Mary Ellen!

MARY ELLEN

[*Answering from her bedroom.*]

Was that Cynthy? She gone?

ANITA

Yes.

MARY ELLEN

I guess I was kinder 'fraid o' lettin' her see me in this dress. I don't hardly know's I want you to.

[*She comes in, shy and hardly hoping for approval. She is a woman of perhaps forty-six, of a delicate loveliness overlaid by a look of pathetic endurance. She has been as warmly in love with life as Anita is now, but has*

dumbly fought down in herself every emotion that rebels against the recognized system of things. She is dressed in a silk of an old-fashioned cut, exactly suited to her type of sweet appealingness.]

You see what you think.

ANITA

[*Affectionately giving little caressing pats and rearranging touches to Mary Ellen's neckgear.*]

Now where did you ever come on a dress like this?

MARY ELLEN

Up attic. 'Twas mother's. Ain't it suitable?

ANITA

Sweet. Only it makes me feel as if I'd stepped into Godey's "Lady's Book". Are there any more?

MARY ELLEN

Yes, one. Her weddin' dress. I never have wore 'em. Father kep' me in dark clo'es, but I kinder felt as if I wanted somethin' light—this afternoon.

[*Jane comes in from the hall on her way to the kitchen.*]

JANE

I've took the china.

MARY ELLEN

That's right.

JANE

I'll clear up before I go.

MARY ELLEN

No, no. You'll want to get home 'fore the folks come.

JANE

I've got plenty o' time.

[*She goes out to the kitchen.*]

AARON

What's all this about blessin' trees?

MARY ELLEN

It's an ancient custom come from England. Old Gran'ther Hale used to tell about it. Don't you remember? An' now Peter's come back an' hired the farm, he's possessed to keep up the old ways.

ANITA

[*With quick interest.*]

Peter is the one Adam is so fond of?

AARON

[*Dryly.*]

Yes. An' that Jane there is Peter Hale's wife. Portugee! Anybody't married into the family'd be marryin' her, too.

ANITA

Adam couldn't help that.

MARY ELLEN

You think you could use any o' these?

[*She indicates the pile of clothes.*]

AARON

No. Get rid of 'em.

ANITA

Let me. Haven't you an empty drawer?

[*She takes them and goes toward the bedroom door.*]

MARY ELLEN

Don't put 'em in my room.

ANITA

Where shall I?

MARY ELLEN

[*Indicating a little table.*]

Put 'em there an' we'll see.

ANITA

Are these all?

MARY ELLEN

There's another pile o' shirts in the bureau, in the room you're in. Bring 'em here an' I'll look 'em over.

ANITA

[*Leaving the clothes on the little table.*]

No. I'll look them over up there. You don't need to see them.

[*She goes out to the front hall and upstairs.*]

[*Mary Ellen sits at the large table and begins to sew on a shirt she has taken from her work basket.*]

AARON

[*Rising and casually regarding her.*]

That his shirt?

MARY ELLEN

Second-best.

AARON

What you doin' to it?

MARY ELLEN

Jest ketchin' it round the collar.

AARON

What for?

MARY ELLEN

Father never could stand a brack in his clo'es. I had to darn an' darn.

AARON

Well, he's done with 'em now.

[*He goes to the fireplace and begins examining things on the mantel.*]

MARY ELLEN

I know it. But seems if I'd got to go on with it jest the same. Seems if, so long as they're here, he's here too.

AARON

He kep' a pretty tight hand on the rein, didn't he? To the last.

MARY ELLEN

There! Le's not talk about it.

AARON

How soon can you get out o' here?

MARY ELLEN

[*In alarm.*]

Out o' this house?

AARON

Yes. You don't s'pose you're goin' to live on here alone, do ye?

MARY ELLEN

[*Evasively.*]

For the present.

AARON

No. You're goin' with Nita an' me.

MARY ELLEN

[*Defensively.*]

Oh, no, Aaron. I ain't planned it that way.

AARON

[*His eye is caught by the pewter on the shelf.*]

What you intend to do with this?

MARY ELLEN

Why, that's gran'mother's pewter.

AARON

Well, you won't want to leave it behind ye.

MARY ELLEN

Aaron, I ain't goin' to New York.

AARON

[*He begins to take the pewter down and set it on the table.*]
I'll reach it down an' by'n' by we'll pack it up.

MARY ELLEN

Aaron, I ain't goin'—

AARON

I should think you'd like to do somethin' for Nita. This last year she's needed somebody mighty bad. She told you about that affair o' hers?

MARY ELLEN

[*Watching the pewter in distress.*]
No.

[*With a sudden rapt interest.*]
Has Nita fell in love?

AARON

Thinks she has.

MARY ELLEN

Who is it?

AARON

Now I'll tell you who 'tis. It's one o' these same Hales that owned Mill Road Farm as long ago as you an' I can remember anything.

MARY ELLEN

Don't let Jane hear you.

AARON

If she's married one on 'em she knows 'em as well as I do. Worthless—

MARY ELLEN

You can't call 'em worthless.

[*She has followed every movement of his with the pewter in a nervous anxiety, and now, as if she couldn't possibly help it, takes a piece or two from the table, while he has turned to get another, and sets them back on the shelf again. As he takes down the pieces, she continues to set them back, though with no logical purpose, and he, absorbed in the Hales, doesn't find her out.*]

AARON

No Hale ever made a dollar. If they come on one in the gutter they wouldn't ha' picked it up unless 'twas shiny. Crazy—

MARY ELLEN

No, Aaron. They wa'n't crazy.

AARON

They were. 'Twas in the blood. There was old Gran'father Hale, old Apple Hale they called him. He was crazed about apples. Wherever he went he'd plant an apple seed.

MARY ELLEN

[*Dreamily.*]

How good his clo'es al'ays smelt! I used to admire to have him take me up.

AARON

Then there was another that thought he'd got a stoneless plum. By George!

MARY ELLEN

'Twas pretty nigh that. Stone wa'n't no bigger'n a pea.

AARON

Well, that's all there was to it. He didn't know enough to get it on the market. Then there's this Peter, this friend o' yourn. He's a chip o' the old block.

MARY ELLEN

Peter.

AARON

An' there's another—kind of a cousin o' his, next generation.

MARY ELLEN

Adam.

AARON

He's the one Nita's bewitched with.

MARY ELLEN

Ain't he a kind of a druggist?

AARON

Chemist. Agricultural chemistry.

MARY ELLEN

How'd he an' Nita get acquainted?

AARON

He come to me to git a job. Business. You wouldn't know if I told ye. Watch me givin' a Hale a job.

MARY ELLEN

So she's fell in love with Adam Hale.

AARON

Seems so. An' she can fall out ag'in.

MARY ELLEN

Aaron, you ain't come betwixt 'em?

AARON

Yes, I have.

MARY ELLEN

D'you find he was wild or suthin'?

AARON

No! no! He's a Hale, that's all. Do you know what Nita's comin' into if she outlives me?

MARY ELLEN

Why, I never thought, but I s'pose you're worth a good many hunderds o' dollars.

AARON

[*Laughing dryly.*]

Hunderds! Yes, I guess I be. Now, look here. I've got to the place where I expect my money to do me some good an' do Nita good, too. She's pretty an' she's smart. She's fitted to marry amongst folks that wouldn't speak to you or me. Do you s'pose I'm goin' to see her tie herself to Adam Hale? No, by Godfrey!

MARY ELLEN

Well, I'm terrible sorry she's had to give him up.

AARON

I ain't. I hate a Hale as I hate the devil.

MARY ELLEN

You used to go down to Mill Road Farm a good deal, years ago.

AARON

Yes, I did. An' what did it amount to? We'd set round the kitchen an' tell stories.

MARY ELLEN

An' sing.

AARON

Yes. 'Twas when you were goin' with Nate Buell. Whatever come betwixt you an' Nate?

MARY ELLEN

Father did.

AARON

Well, the Buells wa'n't much. There was a crowd of us. We set round the kitchen an' grinned at one another as if grinnin' was the end o' man.

MARY ELLEN

'Twas a proper nice place. There ain't been such times since.

AARON

D'you remember the night father come down an' ordered us home?

MARY ELLEN

I remember.

AARON

We slunk out o' that kitchen like two dogs comin' to heel. Nate Buell follered us out.

MARY ELLEN

I know he did.

AARON

When father got us into the road he asked us if we thought we were growed up, singin' an' dancin' when there was corn to husk. Nate an' I were so mad we could ha' killed him.

MARY ELLEN

You were one on each side o' me an' Nate says to me, "Don't cry."

AARON

Next day Nate an' I got together an' we concluded father was right.

MARY ELLEN

Right!

AARON

Yes. 'Twas time for us to buckle down. An' we never stepped inside the door o' Mill Road Farm ag'in.

MARY ELLEN

[*Dreamily.*]

I dunno what't was about that place that made it so kinder homey an' pleasant. Mebbe 'twas because folks lived there that enjoyed themselves an' wanted other folks to. An' they were always tryin' to git something out o' the earth, somethin' besides money.

AARON

Well, what's this Peter gittin' out of it?

MARY ELLEN

He's prunin' up the trees, an' settin' out new, an' tryin' to coax Jane back to health.

AARON

What's the matter of her?

MARY ELLEN

I dunno's I can say.

AARON

[*He goes to the mantel, opens one of the little cupboards over it, tries the other and finds it locked.*]

What's in here?

MARY ELLEN

[*Getting a key from a book on the secretary shelf.*]

Oh, that's father's medicines.

AARON

What you got 'em locked up for?

MARY ELLEN

I thought best.

AARON

Where's the key?

[*She gives it to him.*]

I might as well be goin' over things while I'm standin' round.

MARY ELLEN

When you git through you lock it up ag'in.

AARON

[*Unlocking the door.*]

Why? What ye got in there?

MARY ELLEN

Brandy an' whisky. You sent him a bottle of each.

AARON

[*He takes out two bottles, examines them and finds the seals unbroken.*]

Father never was no hand for liquor. I might as well take these back.

MARY ELLEN

Then you put 'em in your bag, last thing. Don't you leave 'em settin' round.

AARON

Why not?

[*He puts them back in the cupboard, locks the door and gives her the key.*]

MARY ELLEN

I dunno's I'd ought to tell you.

[*Gravely and cautiously.*]

It's Jane.

AARON

Jane? Out there in the kitchen?

MARY ELLEN

Jane Hale, Peter's wife. She's had a bad habit.

AARON

Drink? Sho! A man's a fool to marry a woman with that kind of a look, anyways. Gypsy trollope!

MARY ELLEN

Well, I s'pose some men'd marry a woman to take care of her.

AARON

I s'pose a Hale might. D'he tell you so?

MARY ELLEN

Peter? No. He ain't that kind. Only sometimes seems if he an' Jane—well, you can't think of 'em as married folks.

AARON

You turn her out. I don't want a drinkin' woman round here. She might set the house afire.

MARY ELLEN

Oh, she ain't touched a drop for over a year. She's been terrible good. I dunno what I should ha' done if it hadn't been for her an' Peter.

AARON

I told you to keep a girl.

MARY ELLEN

Father wouldn't hear to it. He said mother always done her work, an' I'd got to do the same.

AARON

Well, you wa'n't doin' it if this Hale woman was round every day.

MARY ELLEN

He never seemed to mind her. She an' Peter've been back an' forth till you'd think they'd got all wore out. An' over a month now Jane's stayed with me nights. I s'pose father thought seein' they were neighbors they wouldn't ask him nothin'.

AARON

I guess there's no danger of a Hale bringin' in a bill. The Hales always did manage to turn their neighbors' grindstones faster'n their own.

MARY ELLEN

Peter used to come in an' help move father in the bed. He'd even see to the kindlin', an' come over Mondays to empt' my tubs. I don't s'pose he an' Jane'd take any pay, but I thought mebbe you'd make her a handsome present.

AARON

Well! Well! We'll see.

MARY ELLEN

Aaron.

AARON

Well.

MARY ELLEN

About Adam an' Nita. If anything happened to you an' me, I should think you'd like to feel you wa'n't leavin' Nita alone.

AARON

I'd as soon leave her alone as leave her with a Hale. Why, there wa'n't a family in this town that lived so nigh the wind.

MARY ELLEN

They wa'n't any poorer'n we were.

AARON

How long d'we stay poor? I was twenty-one when I went away an' got into rubber. An' I was twenty-six when I bought this house an' I put you an' father into it. An' if you've lacked for anything since, 'tain't my fault.

MARY ELLEN

Well, it all come through father, an' you know how it hurt him to take out his wallet.

AARON

Father was an old-fashioned man, used to old-fashioned ways. You ain't laid that up ag'inst him?

MARY ELLEN

[*With sudden passion.*]

No, I ain't laid it up. I ain't laid it up.

AARON

Now what you want to cry for? You didn't expect him to live, helpless as he was. What you takin' it so hard for?

MARY ELLEN

It ain't his death I'm takin' hard. It's because I can't mourn, Aaron. I can't mourn.

AARON

There! There!

[*Glancing from the window.*]

Who's that?

MARY ELLEN

Who's it look like?

AARON

Well, if that ain't old Eph Grout I'll miss my guess. An' he's got on the same overalls he wore when I was a boy. An' he's hoppin' along jest the same gait.

MARY ELLEN

Call him over. He al'ays likes a bite o' sweet trade. He'll come quick enough.

[*She goes to the sideboard, takes out a crock from below and puts cookies on a plate. Aaron opens the window and calls.*]

AARON

Hey, Uncle Eph! Come over here! [*To Mary Ellen.*] He must be a hunderd an' ten. We boys used to foller him an' dare one another to ask him how he got cracked. Love-cracked, we used to say. Love-cracked!

[*Mary Ellen opens wide the door into the hall and* EPH GROUT *warily appears. He is an old man with thin shaggy beard and gray hair, and shrewd but wandering glance. His movements are quick and jumpy, as if there were ill regulated springs in his legs. He wears overalls much too large for him, and covered with overlapping patches, the resulting surface so worn and grimed as to look like earth and lichen and dead leaves. Mary Ellen, with little inviting words, offers him the cookies, holding the plate low, as one might reassure a timid animal. He ventures a nervous hand toward the plate, but by the time he has touched a cooky and been allowed to take it, he gathers confidence and takes them, one after another, his look of adoration for her, as he interrogates her face, deepening with every one.*]

EPH

One—two—three—four—five—

AARON

[*Making a sudden movement behind him.*]

Boo!

[*Eph jumps in alarm, and whirls about to face him.*]

Look here, Uncle Eph. Look here. D'ye ever see me before?

EPH

[*Recovering his confidence at a pat and smile from Mary Ellen and questioning the empty plate.*]

Six?

MARY ELLEN

Not to-day, Uncle Eph. You slip down to Mill Road Farm, about four o'clock, an' you'll git some sweet trade there.

EPH

[*At once reassured and hopeful.*]

An' lemonade—an' lemonade—

[*He skips out at the hall door.*]

AARON

Godfrey Dominy! What's the use o' sich a creatur' as that cumberin' the ground?

[*He produces a map from his pocket and spreads it on the table.*]

Look here, Mary Ellen. Here's where we are now. You've picked up most o' the land, ain't ye? Five farms an' four wood lots.

MARY ELLEN

[*Going to him.*]

What's that?

AARON

As you pulled in one farm after another, I had this colored accordin' to the deeds.

MARY ELLEN

What is it here where the white runs int' the red?

AARON

That's Mill Road Farm.

MARY ELLEN

So 'tis.

AARON

It ought to be an unbroken sweep o' land from Bald Mountain to Sunset Pond. But now it's like a cake that's bit into. Why ain't you picked up Mill Road Farm?

MARY ELLEN

I couldn't.

AARON

What you done towards it?

MARY ELLEN

Nothin'.

AARON

Why not?

MARY ELLEN

Why, Nathan Buell owns it. 'Twas mortgaged, you remember, an' come into his hands. An' I ain't seen him for twenty-six years this April.

AARON

You could ha' written to him, couldn't ye?

MARY ELLEN

I didn't feel to—about that.

AARON

Didn't you understand what I wanted? I told you to have the deeds made out in your name. An' I furnished the money.

MARY ELLEN

Well, there 'tis, acre upon acre.

AARON

All but Mill Road Farm.

MARY ELLEN

I can't meddle with Mill Road Farm.

AARON

Why not?

MARY ELLEN

Because Peter Hale's set his heart on buyin' it for himself.

AARON

[*Keenly.*]

Think he's got an option on it?

MARY ELLEN

An option, brother? What's that?

AARON

Nate Buell agree to sell?

MARY ELLEN

Yes.

AARON

You've let Peter Hale come in an' sneak it away under your nose, an' you wouldn't write to Buell?

MARY ELLEN

I have wrote.

AARON

What'd he say?

MARY ELLEN

I didn't write about the farm.

AARON

What'd you write for?

MARY ELLEN

I told him father'd passed away.

AARON

What'd he care about father?

MARY ELLEN

Be that as it may, I couldn't ask him to sell me the farm over Peter Hale's head.

AARON

One farm's like another to Peter Hale.

MARY ELLEN

Oh, no, it ain't, Aaron. Peter's bewitched with his trees. An' he's graftin' 'em an' sprayin' 'em an' scrapin' out the rot, an' you never see a happier man nor a contenteder.

AARON

You write to Nate Buell within an hour an' tell him you'll give him a third more'n he can git from Peter Hale.

MARY ELLEN

Aaron, we've got land enough. That's what the neighbors say to me. "What you buyin' up so much land for?" they say. An' if I hadn't give you my word I wouldn't, I'd told 'em what you wrote. I'd said, "Because I've got a good brother, an' he's puttin' hunderds o' dollars into real estate for me, so's I sha'n't come to want."

AARON

You ain't repeated that to nobody?

MARY ELLEN

No. But I'd like to. I'd like to tell 'em my brother Aaron's lookin' out for my old age.

AARON

Your old age'll be all right. There ain't any papers passed betwixt Hale an' Buell, has there?

MARY ELLEN

For the farm?

AARON

Buell ain't agreed to sell, nor Hale ain't paid down anything to bind the bargain?

MARY ELLEN

I dunno.

AARON

Then you write to Buell.

MARY ELLEN

He ain't in Toledo now.

AARON

Where is he?

MARY ELLEN

He's comin' here.

AARON

Comin' east?

MARY ELLEN

Yes. Soon's he got my letter sayin' father'd passed away, he sent me a dispatch.

[*She takes a telegram from her pocket, opens it and looks at it in almost terrified delight.*]

It says, "Comin'. Arrive the fifth." Reads as if he wrote it in a hurry. Never stopped to git the worth of his ten words.

AARON

The fifth? Why, that's to-day.

MARY ELLEN

Yes, to-night. The last train 'twould have to be.

AARON

[*In sudden discovery.*]

You been puttin' that pewter back on the shelves?

MARY ELLEN

Yes, I have, but I'll take it down ag'in. You can pack it up an' carry it off.

AARON

It'll be yours jest the same. I only want you to clear out everything of any value, so's I can let or sell.

MARY ELLEN

[*She takes down the pewter and sets it on the table.*]

You shall have the pewter. But you mustn't think I'm goin' back with you. It ain't that I wouldn't do anything in the world for Nita or you either. But I can't. I ain't free.

AARON

Why ain't ye?

MARY ELLEN

Aaron, that's what I've been tryin' to tell you. Oh, I can't—here's Nita.

[*Nita comes in at the hall door.*]

ANITA

Why, there's your pewter. Then you are going back with us. You dear!

MARY ELLEN

No, no! I ain't goin', Aaron.

[*Wildly.*]

Don't you try to make me give way. I give way years ago, an' if I do it ag'in it'll kill me.

AARON

There, there! You'll feel different in the mornin'. You be ready to take the 6.20. Guess I'll go out an' poke 'round a spell.

[*He goes out by the hall door into the yard.*]

ANITA

I wish he wouldn't hurry so. Why can't he take the day off?

MARY ELLEN

Business, I s'pose. [*With a little wistful humor.*] We shouldn't know if he told us.

ANITA

What were you two talking about?

MARY ELLEN

For one thing, your father spoke to me about you an' Adam Hale.

ANITA

Now what's father told you?

MARY ELLEN

He's terrible set ag'inst the Hales.

ANITA

Poor people, weren't they?

MARY ELLEN

Middlin'.

ANITA

He hates to remember how he began. He hates the people that remember it.

MARY ELLEN

Don't seem as if he need to feel that way.

ANITA

He does. For the last year, since he's thought of retiring, he's simply advertised himself down here—library—iron fence round the graveyard—

MARY ELLEN

Now what's that for? He ain't comin' here to live?

ANITA

No, no. But he's begun to see he hasn't really made good, even if he is a rubber king.

MARY ELLEN

Your father's a terrible smart man.

[*Distressed at the empty shelf where the pewter used to live she begins taking things from the mantel and putting them on the shelf.*]

If anybody's made as much of a place for himself as your father has—

ANITA

Ah, but the only place he's made is in rubber. I've no place either.

MARY ELLEN

Why, Nita, you must have made friends.

ANITA

I haven't been willing to run with people that wouldn't stand for father. And they can't. If he ever had a spark of interest in anything but money, he stamped it out years ago.

MARY ELLEN

[*With a sad little smile.*]

When father ordered him home from Mill Road Farm.

ANITA

When was that?

MARY ELLEN

Oh, never mind, dear. I was only goin' back to old times.

ANITA

Father and I are in the same box. He'd like to distinguish himself now when it's too late. I'd like to have him.

MARY ELLEN

Nita, I never heard a girl speak so about her father.

ANITA

Oh, I know father. You can't live with a person twenty years and not know him. Didn't you know grandfather?

MARY ELLEN

Oh!

ANITA

Why don't you face things? Face grandfather's memory. You see the mistake was not having the sand to face grandfather himself.

MARY ELLEN

I wa'n't brought up that way. But, Nita, I want to say this. It was what I was tryin' to tell your father. I'm goin' to have a home o' my own.

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen!

MARY ELLEN

An' however things are betwixt you an' your father, you'll be dearly welcome to it.

ANITA

Why, you're coming with us.

MARY ELLEN

No, Nita. I'm goin' to be married.

ANITA

Married!

MARY ELLEN

I guess that's what your father'd say—jest that same way. Well, I s'pose 'tis funny, a woman o' my years.

ANITA

Who is he?

MARY ELLEN

Nathan Buell.

ANITA

Does father know him?

MARY ELLEN

He used to.

ANITA

And you've told father?

MARY ELLEN

No, but I've got to. There's jest one thing that gives me courage—your father havin' me buy up all this land round here. I say to myself, "He's doin' everything he can to provide for me, an' if I want

to change my state he'll stan' by me in that." 'Twas buyin' the land that led me to hear from Nathan Buell. I had to send to him about a right o' way. An' Nathan wrote back an' he says, "Can't you conclude to marry me?"

ANITA

What did you say?

MARY ELLEN

I showed the letter to father, an' he put it into an envelope an' sent it back without a word.

ANITA

So you didn't answer?

MARY ELLEN

Not till Nathan wrote ag'in.

ANITA

Did you show grandfather that?

MARY ELLEN

No. I thought best not. I wrote Nathan, "I can't leave father." But when father was gone, I wrote ag'in. See here.

[*She shows Anita the telegram.*]

ANITA

The fifth. Why he might be here now.

MARY ELLEN

It'll be the last train.

[*She draws out a ring hung by a chain about her neck.*]

Here's the ring he give me twenty-seven years ago this month.

ANITA

So he's coming. Are you glad?

MARY ELLEN

Sometimes when I think o' seein' him ag'in, seems if I couldn't live. All them times come back, spring with the laylocks in bloom, fall with the leaves a-turnin' an the smell o' grapes.

ANITA

But he'll be changed.

MARY ELLEN

So I tell myself. I'm changed. So'll he be. But if he can bear the sight o' me I can—crave the sight o' him.

ANITA

Why, he'd be as old as father.

MARY ELLEN

Pretty near.

ANITA

Suppose he turned out just like father.

MARY ELLEN

He wa'n't like your father, Nita.

ANITA

He never—married?

MARY ELLEN

He did marry. His wife died.

ANITA

You don't—feel any different—for that?

MARY ELLEN

I've thought it all out an' I couldn't blame him. He had to have a home, didn't he?

ANITA

I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed.

MARY ELLEN

Well, what if I be? Is he the same man he would ha' been if I'd married him? No, of course he ain't. An' that's what I've got to remember, every instant o' my life. But I don't want you to travel the road I've traveled. I don't want you to give up your youth. It's like killin' somethin' that won't come alive.

ANITA

But it's come alive in you.

MARY ELLEN

I've kep' it alive. I've fanned it when 'twas dyin', an' poured my blood into it till it seems if sometimes I hadn't enough left to keep my heart a-goin'.

[*Exultantly.*]

But I have. My heart's kep' right on, an' I shall have my life yet. I want you to have your life, too.

ANITA

I shall have my life. If I don't have it with a man I shall have it by myself.

MARY ELLEN

You can't, Nita, you can't. Men an' women were made to live together, an' they ain't much of anything alone.

ANITA

You've learned to live alone. But now you're planning to live with a perfectly strange man. You're the most daring woman I ever saw.

MARY ELLEN

You've got to be darin' in them things. Ain't mothers darin' when they bring their children into the world? If ye don't take no risk, where be ye?

ANITA

Suppose it goes wrong?

MARY ELLEN

Goes wrong!

[*Scornfully.*]

Your father said you were in love. I don't believe it. You wouldn't think it *could* go wrong.

ANITA

I don't know Adam Hale yet.

MARY ELLEN

Don't your heart tell ye?

ANITA

I know what my heart tells me. But my head tells me he's young, he's handsome. That's nature's game.

MARY ELLEN

No, you don't love him.

ANITA

Oh, I've got as drunk as you have.

MARY ELLEN

Anita!

ANITA

On love music in operas, and things like that. But I wouldn't marry even Adam Hale if he didn't make good. And father's pretty well convinced me he won't.

MARY ELLEN

Well, ain't you goin' to help him?

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen, do you know what it is to be ashamed? To be thrown with people who've got things to be proud of and know you've nothing yourself? A man must bring me what I haven't got—and can't get without him.

MARY ELLEN

Nita, you look at me. My life's been as bare as your hand, an' if I had it to live over ag'in I'd stan' up an' look father in the face— No, I couldn't. I couldn't. I was a little young thing, same's you be now. But you see where I be to-day, an' don't you give up the man you love because he's poor, nor because he comes of plain folks, nor because your father tells you to. If Adam ain't got much to bring you—why, you make it up to him. No, you don't love him.

ANITA

Maybe not.

MARY ELLEN

[*Watching the effect of her words.*]

Nita, d'you know Adam's here?

ANITA

[*Startled.*]

Here?

MARY ELLEN

Down to Mill Road Farm.

ANITA

What's he doing?

MARY ELLEN

He's goin' to live with Peter. They'll carry on the land.

ANITA

[*Incredulously.*]

Down here?

MARY ELLEN

Within ten minutes' walk.

ANITA

[*In a burst of delight.*]

I might have known. That's why I'm so happy here. I haven't been so happy—O Aunt Mary Ellen!

[*She runs into Mary Ellen's arms.*]

MARY ELLEN

[*Triumphantly.*]

You do like him. I guess you like him enough. There's Peter Hale drivin' up.

[*Humorously alive to her wet eyes.*]

I guess I need the roller towel.

ANITA

Peter Hale?

MARY ELLEN

Adam's cousin. I guess you'd jest as soon talk to him for a minute.

[*She goes out into the kitchen.*]

[*Anita opens the door for* PETER HALE, *who enters carrying a birch log and a big bunch of apple blossoms. He is a lithe, quick-moving man of forty-nine or fifty-one or two, with a clean-shaven face, eloquent eyes, brilliant smile and great charm of ingenuous manner.*]

ANITA

Mr. Hale? I'm Anita Barstow.

PETER

Oh!

[*He gives her a spray of apple blossoms.*]

D'ye ever see anything prettier 'n that?

ANITA

Lovely! Aunt Mary Ellen will be right back, but before she comes I want to tell you I know how awfully good you've been to her.

PETER

Anybody'd be good to her.

[*He leaves the log by the hearth, takes the flowers from the vase on the little table, drops them in the waste basket and puts his apple blossoms in the vase.*]

ANITA

Mr. Hale.

PETER

Yes.

ANITA

You going home from here?

PETER

Yes.

ANITA

Couldn't you take these?

[*She indicates the pile of clothing.*]

PETER

Why, them ain't the old gentleman's clo'es?

ANITA

Yes.

PETER

[*With involuntary distaste.*]

I don't believe I've got any use for 'em.

ANITA

Burn them. They make her nervous. I believe they frighten her.

PETER

I should think they would. Yes. We're goin' to burn a brush heap this afternoon. Part o' the exer-

cises. I'll lay 'em in under the edge, an' they shall return to the earth as they was.

[*He steps into the hall, leaves them there and comes back.*]

ANITA

You're awfully kind. Could we—

PETER

What?

ANITA

Could we do anything—in return?

PETER

No. I've no bill ag'inst ye.

ANITA

Please! Let father buy you something—a plough or a mowing machine.

PETER

Or a harrer? There's one thing he can do. See 't the harrer's lifted off Mary Ellen.

ANITA

Off Aunt Mary Ellen?

PETER

Don't ye know the sayin'—toad under a harrer? That's Mary Ellen. Time an' ag'in I've thought I'd got her out an' set her in the shade. By thunder! She hops right back into the furrer.

ANITA

She sha'n't get into the furrow again. She's going to live with us.

PETER

[*Startled.*]

Mary Ellen?

ANITA

Yes. With father and me.

PETER

Mary Ellen'll be missed.

ANITA

Oh, I can fancy the whole town missing her.

PETER

I wa'n't thinkin' about the town. I was thinkin' of the robins—they won't sing so loud—an' the apple trees—they won't bloom so pink.

ANITA

Why, Mr. Hale, you're a poet.

PETER

She's comin'. I know her step.

[*Anita, with a nod and one of her best smiles at him, goes out by the hall door, upstairs.*]

[*Mary Ellen comes in from the kitchen, bringing a medium-sized basket for the pewter.*]

MARY ELLEN

Hullo, Peter.

PETER

[*Giving her an apple spray.*]

Off "Hale's Favorite". That's the one we're goin' to bless last. So that's Anita Barstow.

MARY ELLEN

[*Admiring the spray and putting it with the lilacs on the mantel.*]

D'you know there was anything between her an' Adam?

PETER

Yes. That's what I've come to tell you. Adam see her drive by. Went wild. He's a still kind of a chap. Never'd opened his head if he hadn't seen her like that, all of a sudden. But I thought if she took a notion to come down to the farm this afternoon—well, he's there an' she ought to be prepared.

MARY ELLEN

You think he's a good stiddy feller, don't you, Peter?

PETER

I know he is. Got more ballast'n—some of us Hales.

MARY ELLEN

I hope Nita ain't goin' to be called on to—give him up for good.

PETER

So do I. Well, he's down there. You keep her away if you think best. [*Noticing the pewter on the table.*] What's this?

MARY ELLEN

I've give the pewter to Aaron to take back with him.

PETER

Why, it's your pewter. Your mother left it to you.

MARY ELLEN

That don't make any odds.

PETER

Does, too. I'm goin' to set it right back where it belongs. By George!

MARY ELLEN

No, no! Nita'll have it in the end. She might as well have it now.

[*She begins wrapping it in the pieces of cloth she has brought in the basket.*]

PETER

Give it here. I'll do it, if it's got to go.

[*He begins to wrap the pewter and put it in the basket.*]

MARY ELLEN

I 'most hope Nita'll go down there. I hope Adam'll see her.

PETER

He's pretty sore.

MARY ELLEN

Thinks she ain't treated him right?

PETER

I dunno.

MARY ELLEN

I want to stan' by Nita. 'Twon't do no good. But it'll be somethin' for her to know there's somebody standin' by.

PETER

What makes you say 'twon't do no good?

MARY ELLEN

Aaron's ag'inst it.

PETER

S'pose he is.

MARY ELLEN

Aaron's jest like father. What he wants he's goin' to have.

PETER

You couldn't stand up to your father, could you, Mary Ellen? Years ago, I mean.

MARY ELLEN

Who told you that?

PETER

I hadn't lived here a month 'fore Cynthy Coleman says to me: "Now there's Mary Ellen Barstow. She ain't had any more life of her own than if she never'd been born into the world. Her father broke up her marryin' Nate Buell, an' she never'd look at anybody else."

MARY ELLEN

You can't look at anybody else.

PETER

Somebody'd ought to made ye. Got right in betwixt ye an' the light that dazzled ye an' said, "Here I be."

[*Involuntarily he straightens himself and looks at her commandingly.*]

MARY ELLEN

[*Passionately.*]

Don't you see, Peter? That's why I don't want Nita's youth to go by as mine has gone. You can't set back the clock.

PETER

[*Taking out his watch.*]

Can't ye? Why, you're fast. Look-a-here.

[*He sets back the clock hand.*]

MARY ELLEN

[*In alarm.*]

Oh, father never wanted anybody to meddle with the hands.

PETER

Didn't he?

MARY ELLEN

He said 'twas bad for the works.

PETER

Look-a-here, Mary Ellen, wouldn't you ruther wear out the sooner if you knew you're goin' with the sun?

MARY ELLEN

[*Raptly.*]

Goin' with the sun!

PETER

I never see Nate Buell, but I bet ye he's a sharp hand at a trade.

MARY ELLEN

Sellin' you the farm?

PETER

Yes. He give me to understand he'd sell it, but 't was in such a way as to ketch me an' not bind him.

MARY ELLEN

Then he never meant it. Nathan Buell's a very religious man.

PETER

How'd you know that?

MARY ELLEN

He wrote me he'd give all he had to the Lord.

PETER

Wish I'd made my bargain through the Lord. When I asked for an option Buell wrote back, "I'll take"—

MARY ELLEN

[*Quickly.*]

No, don't you tell me. I don't want to know what he'll take. [*In a voice unconsciously moved and softened.*] He's comin' here.

PETER

Comin' here? What for?

MARY ELLEN

I can't tell you, Peter. Not—now.

PETER

He ain't comin' here after you?

MARY ELLEN

Peter—s'pos'n' he was?

PETER

I won't have it.

MARY ELLEN

I s'pose you'd say I'm too old to think o' such things any more.

[*Jane comes into the pantry and stands, silent, by the open door.*]

PETER

Old? You?—But—Nate Buell! Oh, I won't have it, Mary Ellen. I tell you I won't have it.

JANE

[*Coming in from the pantry and speaking sharply.*]

Mary Ellen! See 'f you think the bread's done. I'm tired o' watchin' it.

MARY ELLEN

[*Startled.*]

Oh, I forgot.

[*She goes out to the kitchen.*]

PETER

[*To Jane.*]

What d' you speak like that for?

JANE

To git her out o' the room. To stop your mouth. Don't you want her to git married?

[*Peter is silent.*]

Ain't she goin' to git married?

PETER

How should I know?

JANE

She goin' away to live?

PETER

I dunno, I tell ye.

JANE

If she goes away, you won't work an' slave for her any more.

PETER

[*Out of his musing.*]

I ain't done anything—to speak of.

JANE

An' I sha'n't work—to make things easy for her.

PETER

Ain't you wanted to help Mary Ellen?

JANE

What do you care whether I wanted to or not? Anyways, we sha'n't do it no more, either of us.

PETER

[*Hearing Mary Ellen's step.*]

Stop right there.

[*Mary Ellen comes in. She looks from one to the other in concern.*]

PETER

[*To Jane.*]

Well, we might as well be goin'. You ready?

JANE

I ain't goin'.

MARY ELLEN

Why, Jane, why not?

JANE

I've got everything ready down there. The table's set an' the lemonade's coolin'. But I ain't goin' to dance an' sing with folks laughin' behind my back an' whisperin', "Look at Peter Hale's wife—Portugee!"

[*To Peter.*]

An' they'll laugh behind your back, too, because you married me.

MARY ELLEN

No, Jane. They wouldn't. They're nice folks.

JANE

[*Sullenly.*]

I s'pose I've got to go. I don't want to ride. I'll go by the short cut. I'll be back in the mornin' an' git breakfast.

[*She goes out at the hall door.*]

MARY ELLEN

You don't s'pose she feels a cravin'?

PETER

No.

MARY ELLEN

She ain't touched a drop for over a year now. Sometimes 't seems too good to be true. But to-day, it's as if she thought somethin' was goin' to happen. She can't foretell, Peter? Course she can't!

PETER

Uneasy, that's all. It's her foreign blood, I s'pose.

MARY ELLEN

It's been a kind of a hard day, gittin' ready for the folks down there. An' comin' on top of all she's done for me these last months. Why, Peter, think how you've both run back an' forth all through father's sickness, an' how she's stayed nights with me since I've been alone.

PETER

I never thought Jane done more'n she wanted to.

MARY ELLEN

No. She's been the best neighbor anybody ever had. So've you, Peter.

[*Aaron comes in at the hall door.*]

MARY ELLEN

Mr. Hale, brother.

AARON

[*With a grudging nod.*]

Oh! Livin' down to the farm?

PETER

Mill Road Farm.

AARON

What set you out to come back here an' settle down?

PETER

Well, 't was the trees.

AARON

Trees?

PETER

There's always been somethin' terrible precious to me about New England apples.

AARON

I shouldn't want to put labor into a farm 't wa'n't my own.

PETER

I'm goin' to buy Mill Road Farm. You know what my folks were.

AARON

Yes. I know 'em. Egg an' bird.

PETER

They were brainy folks—

AARON

[*Amazed.*]

Hey?

PETER

But they never got anywheres. Always aimin' at the stars an' stubbin' their toes while they looked. Now I feel as if I owed somethin' to them. I want folks when they ride by to p'int out Mill Road Farm an' say, "That's the old Hale place. A Hale owns it now. There ain't a better farm in the state." Why, I should feel as if all the dead an' gone Hales would rise up in bloom time in a kind o' pink an' white procession an' say, "Go ahead. We sowed an' you may reap."

AARON

Why don't ye buy land that's got some peth left in it?

PETER

That ain't the kind o' land I want. I want to take some perishin' thing that ain't but jest got the breath o' life an' breathe in new. I'd ruther prune an old apple tree than set out a dozen seedlin's.

AARON

[*Carelessly.*]

Ain't bought the farm yet?

PETER

It amounts to that. I've got the option.

AARON

What's Buell asked ye?

PETER

Twelve hundred.

ANITA

[*Running in from the hall, calling.*]

Aunt Mary Ellen! Aunt Mary Ellen!

AARON

What's the matter?

ANITA

Somebody's come.

AARON

[*Looking from the window.*]

Some kind of a peddler. Bag in his hand.

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen, don't you know?

MARY ELLEN

[*Wondering.*]

Why, no.

ANITA

Think! Think!

[*To Aaron, who is about to open the door.*]

Don't! Let her open the door.

[*She takes the spray of apple blossoms from her dress and tucks it in Aunt Mary Ellen's.*]

Now open the door.

MARY ELLEN

Why, I dunno who 't is.

[*It comes to her, and with a cry she buries her face in her hands.*]

Oh, I can't! I can't!

[*Anita opens the door.*]

[NATHAN BUELL *comes in. He is a thin, dried man, something over fifty, keen, nosing, pharisaical, always looking out for the main chance and so eager for it that he can ill conceal his purpose.*]

NATHAN

[*Speaking to Anita, whom he sees first.*]

Mary Ellen!

ANITA

[*Calling gently.*]

Aunt Mary Ellen!

NATHAN

[*Still to Anita.*]

You ain't changed a hair. You dress gayer 'n you used to.

[*She shakes her head at him. He stares at her doubtfully.*]

It *is* Mary Ellen, ain't it?

ANITA

[*Softly.*]

Aunt Mary Ellen!

MARY ELLEN

[*Advancing slowly.*]

You ain't Nathan Buell?

NATHAN

[*Now he sees her, comes toward her, and they face each other.*]

You ain't Mary Ellen Barstow?

MARY ELLEN

They tell me Nita does favor me some as I was.

NATHAN

[*Tritely.*]

A good many seasons have rolled by.

ANITA

[*Significantly.*]

Father, Mr. Hale is going.

AARON

How are ye, Nate? Number o' years sence we went barefoot together.

NATHAN

That you, Aaron? I guess we've all changed some.

[*Nathan and Aaron shake hands in a perfunctory way.*]

But the Lord's looked out for me. I don't feel my age.

ANITA

Father! Come!

NATHAN

[*Glancing at Peter.*]

This one o' the old neighbors? I don't seem to recollect—

AARON

Peter Hale.

[*He goes out at the hall door.*]

NATHAN

[*To Peter.*]

Oh, you're that wanderin' Hale.

PETER

Well, I ain't wanderin' now. I'm livin' on your farm. When can I have a talk with you?

NATHAN

Oh, I s'pose you're all for whippin' up a trade. Well, I might as well tell ye I ain't in any hurry to sell.

PETER

You remember I asked for an option.

ANITA

[*Insistently.*]

Come, Mr. Hale.

PETER

Yes. They're waitin' for me down there. Good-bye, Mary Ellen.

[*He goes out, and Anita, with a sad look at Mary Ellen, goes with him.*]

NATHAN

Well, Mary Ellen, ye got my telegram, didn't ye?

MARY ELLEN

Yes.

NATHAN

So you expected me.

MARY ELLEN

I dunno what I expected.

NATHAN

Kind of upset ye, ain't it? Want I should git ye a tumbler of water?

MARY ELLEN

No. [*In a dazed way trying to account for her bewilderment.*] I didn't think you'd come till seven.

NATHAN

Found I could save three hours by gittin' out at the junction. An' look here, I sent the team back. That's all right, wa'n't it?

MARY ELLEN

The team?

NATHAN

Hired him to bring me over. Cost me a dollar. Guess ye can keep me overnight.

MARY ELLEN

We're kind of up in arms—house cleanin' an' all. But Cynthy'd keep you—Cynthy Coleman.

NATHAN

It's terrible costly gittin' round unless ye've got friends to put ye up. Well, you know what I come on here for?

MARY ELLEN

[*Wildly.*]

Oh, I thought I did. Now you're here it seems like nothin' but a dream.

NATHAN

When I wrote ye I hadn't changed a hair, I meant it.

MARY ELLEN

I guess we've all changed.

NATHAN

So we have. So we have. Fur's our looks go. But I'd ha' known ye.

MARY ELLEN

My looks ain't nothin' to brag of.

NATHAN

They're good enough for me. "Favor is deceitful an' beauty is vain", the Scriptur' says. Mary Ellen, we've got to come to an understandin'.

MARY ELLEN

Not to-day, Nathan. Oh, not to-day.

NATHAN

Why ain't to-day as good as any?

MARY ELLEN

You've took me by surprise. I wanted you to come, an' now you're here—why, you're a stranger to me.

NATHAN

We'll marry fust an' do our courtin' afterwards. I don't want no talk about it till it's done. I won't have Aaron commandin' ye nor the girl persuadin' ye. I want ye to set the day an' set it now.

MARY ELLEN

[*Shrinking as he advances.*]

I can't.

NATHAN

Don't ye say that. Ye've thought "can't" all your life ever sence your father come betwixt us.

MARY ELLEN

You've got to give me time, Nathan. You've got to give me time.

NATHAN

What for?

MARY ELLEN

I don't feel as if I knew you.

NATHAN

You knew me twenty-five or thirty year ago.

MARY ELLEN

Oh, yes. I knew you then. I thought I did.

NATHAN

Well, don't I tell ye I ain't changed? Except I've found the Lord.

MARY ELLEN

You look—changed. Your talk is changed.

NATHAN

Well, le's git to business. All that land you been buyin' up stan's in your name, don't it?

MARY ELLEN

Yes.

NATHAN

Aaron backed ye, didn't he?

MARY ELLEN

Backed me?

NATHAN

Give ye the money to buy.

[*She breaks down, laughing wildly.*]

What you laughin' at?

MARY ELLEN

Oh, I can't help laughin'. It's spring and Peter Hale's bringin' in apple blooms an' Nita stickin' 'em in my dress—an' you comin' back—an' our talkin' about money an' land.

NATHAN

I guess you're beat out. The old gentleman's sickness kinder told on ye, didn't it? Look here, Mary Ellen, long's Aaron's been buyin' up land adjoinin', why didn't he buy Mill Road Farm?

MARY ELLEN

It ain't in the market.

NATHAN

Oh, yes, 't is. I'd ought to know. It's mine.

MARY ELLEN

You've as good as sold it to Peter Hale.

NATHAN

There ain't no papers passed.

MARY ELLEN

That's what Aaron asked me.

NATHAN

He did, did he? Aaron's got his eye on it.

MARY ELLEN

What do you mean by papers passed?

NATHAN

[*He takes a paper from his wallet and shows it to her.*]

Why, if I'd wanted to bind Peter Hale I'd ha' give him a paper like this. See? I promise to sell, an' he pays me a sum o' money down.

MARY ELLEN

A sum o' money down.

[*She goes to the secretary drawer and takes out her purse.*]

NATHAN

What ye got there?

MARY ELLEN

It's my pocket-book. It's all the money I've got in the world, twelve dollars an' eighty-five cents.

NATHAN

Land poor, ain't ye? Look here, Mary Ellen, you promise me.

MARY ELLEN

Promise what?

NATHAN

There ain't but one kind o' promise betwixt a man an' a woman.

MARY ELLEN

I can't. I can't.

[*Aaron and Anita come in.*]

AARON

[*With meaning, to Mary Ellen.*]

You had any talk with Buell about—you know?

MARY ELLEN

No, Aaron, not what you mean.

AARON

Look here, Nathan, you don't want to get rid o' Mill Road Farm, do ye?

MARY ELLEN

Brother!

AARON

I understand you'd sell.

NATHAN

I dunno but I would an' I dunno *as* I would.

MARY ELLEN

Brother, the farm's as good as sold to Peter Hale.

NATHAN

That's all talk.

AARON

I'm prepared to make ye an offer.

NATHAN

I dunno's I'll sell.

MARY ELLEN

Nathan, would you take that farm away from Peter Hale, an' sell it to my brother?

NATHAN

I dunno but I would an' I dunno *as* I would.

MARY ELLEN

I tell you, you can't do it. Peter Hale's got all his apple trees in order, an' the Hale's Favorite is bloomed full. You can't ask him to go away an' leave that tree.

ANITA

No!

AARON

I'll offer ye a third more'n you were goin' to git from Hale.

NATHAN

Le's see—how much'd I tell Hale he could have it for?

AARON

Twelve hunderd. So he said.

NATHAN

A third o' twelve is four an' twelve an' four's sixteen—

MARY ELLEN

Look here, Nathan. Don't you sell that farm to Aaron. You sell it to me.

NATHAN

[*Indulgently.*]

I guess you better let Aaron an' me dicker a spell.

AARON

It's business, Mary Ellen. You stay out on't now.

MARY ELLEN

Wa'n't it business when I bought up all the land round here? Wa'n't it business when you beseeched me to buy Mill Road Farm? Well, I'm buyin' it. Nathan, I want Mill Road Farm.

NATHAN

I guess 'twill be full as well if you let Aaron an' me talk it over together.

MARY ELLEN

[*To Nathan, with a sudden breathless resolution.*]

You remember that promise you jest asked me for?

NATHAN

I thought you'd come to it.

MARY ELLEN

If you'll sell me Mill Road Farm—

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen! Don't!

MARY ELLEN

You sell me Mill Road Farm, an' I'll agree to marry you. An' I'll pay you your price. Only you give me time to do it in. You give me a month.

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen!

AARON

Marry him? You're a born fool. The man don't want ye.

NATHAN

Aaron, you keep out. This is a little understandin' betwixt Mary Ellen an' me.

[*He turns to Mary Ellen.*]

I'll sell ye the farm.

AARON

You've heard I'm well off, an' you want to feather your nest.

NATHAN

[*With an effect of placating Aaron.*]

The question before the house is now, sellin' that farm.

MARY ELLEN

[*She brings pen and ink from the desk to the table.*]

I want papers passed between us. I want it fair an' square. Where's that paper?

[*He produces it.*]

Write my name instead o' Peter Hale's.

[*She puts money on the table.*]

An' there's ten dollars. That's "money down".

NATHAN

[*Writing.*]

Consid'able of a business woman, ain't ye? I expect to be proud o' ye.

MARY ELLEN

[*Reading over his shoulder.*]

"In consideration of"— That's right, I guess, Aaron, ain't it right?

AARON

[*Reading.*]

That's right.

MARY ELLEN

Nita, you be the witness.

ANITA

I won't.

MARY ELLEN

Aaron, you witness.

[*Aaron signs.*]

ANITA

Tear the paper up.

AARON

Mary Ellen, I'll keep it for ye.

MARY ELLEN

[*Snatching the paper from under Aaron's hand.*]

No. I've got it an' I'll keep it. Then I shall know where I be. Now I'm goin'.

ANITA

Where are you going?

MARY ELLEN

Down to Mill Road Farm. To tell Peter Hale we've got ahead of him. He had faith in another man, so he didn't ask for papers signed an' money down. That's how we could git ahead of him. We're so terrible knowin' we pay money down. You can come an' see the trees blessed, them trees you were goin' to buy from under Peter Hale's hand. But you ain't going to tell him we've got ahead of him. That's mine to do.

[*She runs out, leaving them amazed.*]

CURTAIN

ACT II

The same afternoon, a little later. The dooryard of Mill Road Farm. There is an open shed connecting the end of the house with the barn. In each end of the shed—the one next the house and the one next the barn—are odd assortments of things having to do with farm life: a pile of wood, a chopping block, saw horse, tools, etc., near the house, and at the other end, old barrels, a workbench, harness hung from pegs, etc. Near the house is the Hale's Favorite tree, and just beyond the yard an orchard thick with bloom. As the curtain goes up voices are heard in the distance singing "Summer Is Icumen In", presently dying quite away.

ADAM *is doing the last clipping of grass round the Hale's Favorite. He is a fine, upstanding young fellow with a frank, free look.* JANE *comes out from the house.*

JANE

Many of 'em come?

ADAM

Yes, a dozen or so. Down in the lower orchard.

JANE

Where's Peter?

ADAM

Right here.

[*Jane takes up the basket of china Cynthia Coleman has left by the door and carries it off to the tables behind the house. Peter comes in from the road. He carries "Barstow's clo'es", and lays them on a covered barrel at the end of the shed.*]

PETER

Well, Adam?

ADAM

Thought I'd mow round Hale's Favorite.

PETER

Yes.

ADAM

Going to have the first dance round it, aren't you?

PETER

No, the last. That brings us up here for the end.

ADAM

What you got there?

PETER

Old Barstow's clo'es.

ADAM

What for?

PETER

A young lady asked me to cart 'em away so's they shouldn't scare her Aunt Mary Ellen.

ADAM

[*With sudden, vivid interest.*]

You've seen her then?

PETER

Mary Ellen?

ADAM

Have you seen Nita Barstow?

PETER

Yes.

ADAM

How'd she look?

PETER

You want to know whether she's frettin' for you? I don't believe anybody'd find that out in a hurry.

ADAM

You didn't mention my name?

PETER

Not to her. I did to Mary Ellen. Barstow's told her about you an' the girl.

ADAM

What's he told her?

PETER

I dunno. But Mary Ellen's up in arms, ready to stan' by you an' Nita. Adam, what parted ye?

ADAM

Shut up, Pete.

PETER

Hadn't you got ahead enough?

ADAM

Not to satisfy Barstow.

PETER

Well, what's he got to do with it anyway, if you suited his girl?

ADAM

That's it.

PETER

Didn't she—like you, Adam?

ADAM

Would you marry a girl that could be turned against you?

PETER

By George! I'd twitch her round an' turn her back ag'in.

ADAM

She's ambitious as the devil.

PETER

She don't look like that kind of a girl.

ADAM

[*Grimly.*]

Well, she's a very good working model of that kind.

PETER

She's young. She don't know what she wants. You tell her.

ADAM

A woman that wants me'll know without telling.

PETER

She madded ye, didn't she, an' you laid back your ears an' stopped pullin'.

ADAM

I stopped talking.

PETER

See here, Adam. You look at the birds an' the other matin' things. What are they doin' this spring weather?

ADAM

Getting a monopoly of hair and string.

PETER

They're charmin' their mates.

ADAM

I ain't long on birds.

PETER

Don't take much stock in the spring, do ye?

ADAM

No.

PETER

Didn't ye take stock in it last year?

ADAM

Oh, last year! I felt different then.

PETER

Yes. You'd found your mate. But you hadn't the sense to coax her into the nest. O you fool! With the sun shinin' overhead an' the sap mountin' upwards an' the apple trees in bloom! If I was young, an' there was somebody that set her eyes by me no further away than Barstow's house up there—

ADAM

Look here, Pete. When it comes to the actual business of life, why are the Hales among the also-rans? It's because they live by that kind of moonshine you're talking.

PETER

Is it moonshine?

ADAM

For all practical purposes. Pete, I've hardened myself. I'm a Hale all right, but I'm not going to let it keep me soft as it's kept you.

PETER

I sha'n't take no less care o' the apple trees for gittin' kinder crazy over their blooms. If that girl comes here to-day—

ADAM

[*Quickly.*]

Is she coming?

PETER

If she comes, you tell her how 'tis with ye. Pull her into the dancin' ring an' let her know you're Adam—an' she's Eve.

ADAM

Hypnotism? No, thank you. I tell you a woman's got to believe in me.

PETER

Mary Ellen does.

ADAM

She took your word.

PETER

Like a shot. Mary Ellen's warm-blooded. Different species from you young shell-fish.

[*His face darkens.*]

Buell's come.

ADAM

Nate Buell?

PETER

Yes.

ADAM

Then you'll conclude your sale.

PETER

Yes. But that ain't what he's here for. He's courtin' Mary Ellen.

ADAM

Why, she's an old—

PETER

No, by George! She ain't so old as I am, not by five years.

ADAM

How old's Buell?

PETER

That ain't the question. He's after Mary Ellen. An' if what I think of Buell's half true, he's after her for her money.

ADAM

Oho? She's the one that's been raking in farms.

PETER

An' Buell's onto it.

[*The fiddlers are heard in the distance, "bowing and scraping" an invitation to the dance. The "neighbors", Cynthia among them, run in, romping and laughing. The*

children are wild with excitement in a good-natured baiting of Uncle Eph, who makes futile darts at them, whereupon they escape, shrieking in delight.]

CHILDREN

Uncle Eph! Uncle Eph!

CYNTHIA

[*To another woman.*]

He's right on hand. 'Specially if there's any sweet trade goin'.

YOUNG MAN

[*Wonderingly, to a young girl.*]

Love-cracked! ain't it queer!

GIRL

[*Coquettishly.*]

I don't see why anybody need to care so much if anybody wouldn't marry 'em.

YOUNG MAN

I should.

GIRL

Oh, you! I guess so.

CHILDREN

[*Breaking out again.*]

Uncle Eph! Uncle Eph!

EPH

Ha! ye little devils! Ye dassent touch me. Ye wouldn't come buzzin' round unless there's folks to uphold ye in it.

CHILDREN

Preach a sermon! Preach a sermon!

CYNTHIA

[*To a man.*]

Won't you stop them boys hectorin' that poor soul?

MAN

Oh, they don't mean no harm. He's as pleased as they be.

CHILDREN

Give us a blessin'.

CYNTHIA

[*Reprovingly.*]

No! No!

CHILDREN

Preach to us! Preach to us!

EPH

[*Mounting an old broken chair.*]

Ladies an' gentlemen—no, no—bretheren an'—no, no—feller sinners— You will find my text in the—

[*He grows vague and tries to collect himself.*]

BOYS

Forty-'leventh chapter. Forty-'leventh chapter.

EPH

We are gethered together—

CYNTHIA

There! You step down. You've gone fur enough.

EPH

[*With great importance.*]

Don't you meddle with me. Unless you'd ruther pronounce the blessin'. If ye don't, I will.

BOY

Uncle Eph! how 'bout that time you got married?

EPH

Where'd ye git hold o' that?

CHILDREN

Tell us 'bout your gittin' married.

EPH

There was two on 'em—my fust trollope an' my second trollope—an' there wa'n't a hair to choose betwixt 'em. Two trollopes. An' bad was the best.

CHILDREN

What'd they do? What'd they do?

EPH

One on 'em was as close as the bark to a tree.

[*He bends down confidentially.*]

Look-a-here. Don't ye let it go no further. She'd make one-two-three-four cake an' never put in no egg.

CHILDREN

Which one was that?

EPH

Black-hair, that's what she was, my black-haired trollope.

[*With the air of telling something of great value.*]

She'd mix up sawdust an' feed it out to the hens.

[*The children laugh. He goes delightedly on.*]

My fust trollope an' my last trollope an' my fust hens an' my last hens—

MAN

How 'bout your t'other wife, Uncle Eph?

EPH

That's my red-haired trollope. How'd ye know? She'd throw the soap grease to the pigs. D'ye ever hear o' such a thing as that? An' she took my good money an' bought her a green rep sofy—

[*Jane returns, and goes to him.*]

JANE

Come, you git down off there.

[*To the crowd.*]

I s'pose you think you're smart, badgerin' a poor thing like that.

[*To Eph.*]

You git down.

[*Eph gets down and approaches her.*]

EPH

[*To Jane.*]

Here! Le's you an' me git married.

[*He touches her sleeve persuasively.*]

JANE

Don't you lay your hand on me.

[*She goes toward the house and he follows her.*]

EPH

You ain't like other folks. I ain't like other folks. Le's you an' me git married.

JANE

[*Turning upon him from the steps.*]

Don't you foller me one step further.

[*She goes quickly in and shuts the door in his face. He looks at it, grieved for a moment, and then, with his childish laugh, turns back to the crowd.*]

CHILDREN

[*Dancing round him.*]

You marry us. You marry us.

[*Cynthia goes away to the tables.*]

A BOY

[*Dragging a girl up to Eph.*]

Here! You marry us.

THE GIRL

[*Fighting him with vigor.*]

Hen Blaisdell, I should think you'd be ashamed.

BOY

Walk right up to the dough dish.

GIRL

I won't do no such thing

BOY

Might's well fust as last.

[*They struggle and the crowd jeers: "Shame! Shame!"*]

CHILDREN

[*Singing.*]

Henry Blaisdell, so they say,
Goes a-courtin' night an' day,

Sword an' pistol by his side:
Lulie Bell shall be his bride.

EPH

[*More and more excited over the topic of "getting married", he runs to the couple and exhorts them wildly.*]

You keep away from one another. Don't ye git married. Don't ye touch one another with a ten-foot pole. You better be biled in ile. Don't none o' ye git married.

[*Cynthia comes in with a half-glass of lemonade which she imbibes with relish.*]

CYNTHIA

[*To Eph.*]

Ye poor soul, ye've got all het up, carryin' on so. You come out to the table an' I'll give ye some lemonade.

EPH

Lemonade! Lemonade!

[*He hops out, and the crowd runs after, singing "Summer Is Icumen In", the music fading away in the distance.*]

ADAM

[*To Peter.*]

We'd better go along, too, an' start 'em off.

PETER

They're started all right. Yes, I s'pose we might as well.

[*As they turn Mary Ellen comes in, breathless.*]

MARY ELLEN

Peter! Peter!

PETER

Mary Ellen!

MARY ELLEN

Adam, that you? Peter, I've come to tell you what I've done.

PETER

[*Bringing forward the chair.*]

Sit down. You're all beat out.

MARY ELLEN

I want to be the first to tell you. I've got ahead of you. I've bought the farm.

PETER

What farm?

MARY ELLEN

This. This that you wanted more'n your life.

PETER

Why, I've got an option on it.

MARY ELLEN

You thought you'd got it, but I'm ahead of you, Peter. The farm's mine.

PETER

Don't you say another word till you git your breath.

MARY ELLEN

You don't believe it. But it's true. I've bought Mill Road Farm.

PETER

There, there, Mary Ellen! Course you ain't bought this farm over my head.

MARY ELLEN

I tell you I have.

PETER

Well, if you want me to believe you've done it, tell me what ye done it for.

MARY ELLEN

Don't ask me that, Peter.

PETER

If it's true, I ain't likely to ask you twice. If you could do it, that's enough.

MARY ELLEN

Don't you go to Nate Buell about it.

PETER

If it's so, it's his place to come to me.

MARY ELLEN

Oh, he'll come. He won't risk no slip-up through you. Don't you speak a word. They'll be down here

soon's they've talked it over. They'll git ahead o' me now, if there's a cent to be made. Don't you open your lips. Not till the deed is passed.

PETER

If the deed ain't passed, you ain't bought the farm. If you've got nothin' but Buell's word—

MARY ELLEN

[*Thrusting the agreement at him.*]

Look here.

PETER

[*Taking it.*]

Adam, you look.

MARY ELLEN

An' what do you s'pose I've paid for it?

PETER

I don't want to know what ye paid.

ADAM

[*Reading from the paper.*]

Ten dollars down and fifteen hundred and ninety in one month.

MARY ELLEN

The paper don't tell all.

PETER

I don't understand ye. You could do that. You could take the farm away from me—

MARY ELLEN

I've got to do more than that. I've got to ask ye for money to pay for it.

PETER

[*Giving her the paper.*]

I don't know ye, Mary Ellen.

MARY ELLEN

[*Taking the paper.*]

Can't you trust me?

PETER

Yes. In spite of this.

MARY ELLEN

Ain't you got the sixteen hunderd dollars, Peter?

PETER

Yes. I've got it.

MARY ELLEN

Wouldn't you have paid that much if Nathan'd asked it, an' you see there wa'n't no other way?

PETER

Yes. Or two thousand either. An' that's every cent I've got in the world.

MARY ELLEN

Then you let me have that sixteen hunderd. You let me have it, Peter.

PETER

Ain't your brother backin' ye?

MARY ELLEN

Don't you question me. You promise me that money now 'fore they come. I ain't got a cent, Peter, not a cent, except what's in my purse.

PETER

Then what'd ye promise it for?

MARY ELLEN

I promised everything I had. I promised to marry Nathan Buell.

PETER

That's no more'n ye meant to do. Ye said as much.

MARY ELLEN

That was before I'd seen him.

PETER

But you have seen him. An' still you're goin' to marry him.

MARY ELLEN

He's promised me Mill Road Farm an' I've promised him that. He's written his promise in this paper, an' I s'pose mine is wrote above.

PETER

You're welcome to the money.

MARY ELLEN

An' they ain't to know it. Remember that. I've got to hold the deed in my hand an' then they shall know the whole. So shall you, Peter. You can think hard o' me till then, if you must. I can bear that too.

PETER

I don't think hard o' you. Aaron's your brother. I s'pose you'd rob a church—for him.

MARY ELLEN

Oh, no, I wouldn't. Not for him. Hush, hear 'em talkin'—Aaron an' Nathan.

PETER

Comin' to see how cold the sheep is sence they sheared him.

[*Aaron, Nathan and Anita come in from the road. A snatch of singing, to "Come, Lasses and Lads", in the distance.*]

NATHAN

Well, how fur ye got talkin' on't over?

AARON

[*To Peter.*]

Pretty full blow this year.

PETER

Yes. Full blow.

ADAM

[*Eagerly.*]

How are you, Nita?

ANITA

[*As if pleasantly surprised.*]

How are you, Adam?

AARON

[*As if unpleasantly surprised. To Adam.*]

How are ye, Hale? Didn't know *you* were here. I guess I'll step into the old kitchen. See if things look as they used to. Come, Nita.

PETER

I guess things ain't much altered.

ANITA

I'm not going, father. I want to—bless the trees.

ADAM

[*In incredulous happiness.*]

Will you do it with me?

ANITA

Is it singing?

ADAM

Yes. And dancing.

ANITA

I'll dance round just four trees. Those four out there.

[*They suddenly take hands and run off to the orchard.*]

AARON

[*Calling.*]

Nita, you wait.

[*To Mary Ellen.*]

Did she know he was here?

MARY ELLEN

I told her.

AARON

Then she'd no business to come down here. Mary Ellen, you run after 'em. Keep 'em from havin' any words together. You're light on your feet. You run.

MARY ELLEN

I ain't light enough for that.

NATHAN

Look here, Hale. I s'pose Mary Ellen's told ye I've made a little change in disposin' o' this farm?

PETER

Yes.

NATHAN

I said if everything went as I expected, mebbe I'd give ye a chance to buy.

PETER

That ain't exactly as I recall it. But it's all one.

NATHAN

But here was Mary Ellen took a notion to the farm, an' nothin'd do but she must have it. You know what women folks be. So seein' she'd set her heart on it, I up an' told her she should have it.

PETER

So I hear.

AARON

[*To Peter.*]

I won't hurry ye off.

PETER

What have you got to do with it?

AARON

Buell's tellin' ye. He's signed an agreement to sell us the farm.

MARY ELLEN

It ain't you, brother. It's me.

AARON

Well! well! It's all one.

NATHAN

Speak up, Mary Ellen.

MARY ELLEN

Don't you push me, Nathan.

AARON

Hale, you won't feel so sore if I tell ye I had my reasons for buyin' this place.

NATHAN

It's Mary Ellen that's bought it.

AARON

I've been pickin' up land round here for quite a while.

NATHAN

It's Mary Ellen that done it.

AARON

I bought in her name.

MARY ELLEN

In my name?

AARON

You'll transfer to me later.

MARY ELLEN

Then it ain't my land?

NATHAN

Yes, 'tis. Yes, 'tis.

PETER

It is, Mary Ellen.

AARON

Course 'tis, legally. But don't you know that's all one? You acted for me.

MARY ELLEN

You didn't tell me I was actin' for you.

AARON

I wanted ye to act in good faith.

NATHAN

Well, so long as Mary Ellen acted in good faith, the land's her'n.

AARON

When I tell her how I'm goin' to dispose of it, she'll be glad an' thankful to sign it over. That land's to be a deed o' gift to the state, for use as a Public Park known as the Barstow Reservation.

MARY ELLEN

The state?

AARON

Yes, sir. The state. My native state.

NATHAN

[*Skeptically.*]

You've bought up a third o' this township to give it away?

MARY ELLEN

Brother, you ain't used me for a tool? I bought the land. It all stan's in my name.

AARON

Yes. So fur.

MARY ELLEN

An' now I'm to make it over to you?

AARON

Course ye be.

MARY ELLEN

Then I tell you in so many words, I won't do it.

NATHAN

Good for you, Mary Ellen.

MARY ELLEN

It ain't the worth o' the land. But you let me believe you were thinkin' o' me, an' you never were, not for one instant. An' I tell you this. The land stan's in my name. An' I won't give it up. So help me, God.

NATHAN

Course ye won't. Don't you back down. He can't make ye.

AARON

Le's consider how we stan'. You've made an agreement to buy this farm.

MARY ELLEN

An' I've paid money down.

AARON

How ye goin' to pay the rest?

MARY ELLEN

I'm goin' to borrer it.

AARON

Where's your security?

NATHAN

You've got plenty o' time, Mary Ellen. 'Tain't for a month. But ye'll have to pay up then. An' I expect ye to pay for the deed.

AARON

Yes. Over fifteen hunderd. Where you goin' to git it?

MARY ELLEN

It'll be provided.

NATHAN

I guess you'll advance her the money, Aaron.

AARON

[*To Mary Ellen.*]

You ain't got a dollar to your name. Ye don't own the clo'es ye stan' up in.

MARY ELLEN

[*With a childlike simplicity.*]

It's mother's dress.

[*In a sudden dazed understanding.*]

But I don't s'pose I do own my clo'es. I bought 'em out o' the money you sent father. Yes, 'twas your money—an' his.

AARON

Don't be a fool, Mary Ellen. I only want ye to realize where ye stan'.

MARY ELLEN

[*In a tremulous hopefulness.*]

Nathan, I ain't got anything to bring you. Mebbe you won't want me now.

PETER

[*Turning aside.*]

My God A'mighty!

NATHAN

Ye've got all the land ye had a minute ago, if ye'll only hang on to it.

MARY ELLEN

Don't you prize me without the land?

NATHAN

What's the use o' talkin' that way? You've got the land.

MARY ELLEN

[*Wildly.*]

My promise! Give me back my promise.

PETER

Don't ask him for it. Break it.

NATHAN

A bargain's a bargain.

MARY ELLEN

A bargain. It's all bargains, then. Well, I'm done.

AARON

Now what d'ye mean by that?

MARY ELLEN

I'm sold up. Bankrupt. I had my youth. I'd ought to spent it as God meant a woman should. Keepin' my house. Bringin' up my children.

AARON

Pretty talk for a good modest woman.

MARY ELLEN

An' how'd I spend my youth? Livin' out my sentence in that house up there—

AARON

You were takin' care o' father.

MARY ELLEN

Settin' at his table because he thought I'd ought to set there, an' bakin' his bread because he thought I'd ought to bake it.

AARON

You could ha' had a hired girl.

MARY ELLEN

But all the time I lived in a dream.

[*Pointing to Nathan.*]

About that man. An' did he dream o' me? No. I s'pose I never once come into his head till he heard I was buyin' up land. Then he thought I was a good investment, an' he come on here after me.

NATHAN

Mary Ellen, it's enough to make anybody stop an' think, hearin' a woman talk like that.

MARY ELLEN

One after another you've traded in me, same's if I was a slave. I shouldn't ha' minded if you'd told me I was a slave. But you were always actin' as if I'd ought to be thankful for your showin' me how to put the spoon to my mouth.

AARON

I should think you were crazed. Git hold o' yourself.

MARY ELLEN

An' now I've had enough of it, an' I want to be free.

[*A snatch of singing in the distance, "Early One Morning".*]

PETER

Yes, an' before another day's gone over our heads, you shall be.

NATHAN

You've made a bindin' promise.

[*Adam and Anita come running in, he determined, she gay and breathless.*]

AARON

Come, Nita. Come, Mary Ellen. We better be gittin' along home.

ADAM

[*To Aaron.*]

Mr. Barstow, give me a minute, will you? I've got something to say to you, and I want to say it right here.

NATHAN

[*Disgustedly.*]

This's no place to talk business.

[*He goes off, with the effect of washing his hands of "folderol", to the road.*]

ADAM

I won't be long.

ANITA

What is it, Adam?

ADAM

Mr. Barstow, I want a new deal.

AARON

I dunno what ye mean. Come, Nita.

ADAM

I thought I never should say another word to Nita, nor to you. But now I want to say it right here in this town where you began yourself.

AARON

That's a good many years ago. Things have changed consid'able.

ADAM

But I want you to remember where you began. And I want Nita to see with her own eyes how I'm beginning. I've gone into partnership with Pete.

AARON

Well, I hope ye'll get on. Come, Nita.

ANITA

Tell us, Adam.

ADAM

If Pete's got to give up this place he'll begin somewhere else and I shall begin with him. But Anita can look round here, right here, and see what kind of a life she'd lead with me.

AARON

Yes. She can.

ANITA

Father!

ADAM

[*To Anita.*]

This is the last word I've got to say. Will you marry me?

ANITA

[*Hopeless over this species of love-making.*]

Adam!

ADAM

Perhaps live in a place just such as this. Get your hands dirty and your face burnt and—do your part.

AARON

Live in some God-forsaken hole—

ADAM

Maybe. I tell you it's no cinch marrying me. You've got to take me as I am.

ANITA

But you don't care for things other people care for.

AARON

There never was a Hale that did.

ANITA

You're so clever, Adam. You could put yourself anywhere.

ADAM

Nita, I'm showing you the worst you'd ever have to bear. If I can better it for you, don't you think I will? But I won't bribe you.

ANITA

That's not—caring.

ADAM

Oh, I've heard the receipt for making love. But that's not my way. The girl that marries me has got to begin by believing in me. Your father's told you what you can expect of a Hale. Now I'll tell you. A Hale—of this generation—can stiffen his backbone just about the time you think he hasn't got any. And when he's talked about so much—to no good—he can shut his mouth.

ANITA

You don't care for anything but—yourself and the Hales.

ADAM

That settles it.

[*He turns away and strides off behind the house.*]

ANITA

[*Miserably.*]

Come, father, let's go home.

AARON

Come, Mary Ellen.

[*Singing, "Come, Lasses and Lads", in the distance.*]

ANITA

[*To Mary Ellen.*]

Are you going to stay?

MARY ELLEN

I dunno. I dunno where I can stay. You go with him, Nita. Git him away from here.

[*Anita and Aaron go off to the road.*]

Peter, I dunno what I've said to 'em nor what I ain't. But whatever 'twas, I had to say it.

PETER

You've let out more this one day than all the time I've known ye.

MARY ELLEN

It's been locked up in me, an' now it's come out. Peter, I've set with father twenty-six years, at the table, in the evenin' by the lamp, an' I might ha' been a dumb woman for all I said to him or all he wanted me to say.

PETER

You've been jailed.

MARY ELLEN

Yes. My thoughts were prisoners. An' now they're comin' out like the swallows out o' that barn. See 'em circle. O my God! I don't hardly know the shape o' my thoughts now I see 'em. But they're flyin' out.

PETER

My thoughts, too. They've been locked up. I don't know's they'd ever got their wings if you hadn't told me you're goin' to marry Buell.

MARY ELLEN

You can't stop it. Nor I can't.

PETER

You an' I've got to speak the truth. My thoughts are flyin' out, same as yours. It's the spring day that set 'em free.

MARY ELLEN

[*Wonderingly.*]

Is it the spring day?

PETER

Yes. Everything's breakin' bounds.

MARY ELLEN

[*Dazed and passing her hand before her eyes.*]

Seems as if there was a mist. The apple blooms look dim.

[*The singing ceases.*]

PETER

Yes. There is a mist. But we've got to see clear, I tell you. We've got to see clear.

MARY ELLEN

Then you help me.

PETER

How'm I goin' to, when all I see is a picture? Not you an' Nate Buell married an' goin' off together—

MARY ELLEN

Together!

PETER

I can't see you an' him. I see you sittin' here by right. You'd be my wife.

MARY ELLEN

We never met then. When we were young.

PETER

Ain't you seen I loved you?

MARY ELLEN

You've been terrible kind to me.

PETER

What'd I do your chores for, an' wait an' tend, if't wa'n't for love o' you?

MARY ELLEN

Why, you were a good neighbor.

PETER

What'd I hang round the house for, night after night, till your light went out?

MARY ELLEN

Did you?

PETER

Yes. I couldn't sleep till I knew you could.

MARY ELLEN

Why, that's like young folks.

PETER

Love's all the same, young or old.

MARY ELLEN

I thought't would be like that when he come back. But now he's come, I can't feel anything.

PETER

No, you can't.

MARY ELLEN

I'm past lovin'.

PETER

You're past lovin' Buell. Are you past lovin' me?

MARY ELLEN

I don't use that word for you.

PETER

Use it then. Say it. Love.

MARY ELLEN

Love.

PETER

Has he kissed you?

MARY ELLEN

No.

PETER

When he does you remember this—an' this.

[*He draws her to him and kisses her passionately.*]

MARY ELLEN

[*As he releases her.*]

Oh, God help me!

PETER

Help you git away from me?

MARY ELLEN

Help me to keep my promise. Help me not to be like this.

PETER

I've kissed you to put bonds on you. To let you know you're mine.

MARY ELLEN

Yes. I ain't anybody's but yours. An' I never knew it.

PETER

You've dwelt on Nathan Buell every day o' your life for twenty-six years. But after this when you shut your eyes you won't see him. You'll see me.

MARY ELLEN

What made you do it, Peter? O, what made you?

PETER

Kiss you? I've kissed you so you'd know. Don't ye know now?

MARY ELLEN

Yes.

PETER

He ain't goin' to trample you down under his hoofs. You're as delicate as them blooms.

MARY ELLEN

I've promised him.

PETER

That tree don't remember 'twas bare a month ago. The past is dead. Everything that happened in it's dead. The tree's in bloom. O Mary Ellen, the blooms are sweet.

MARY ELLEN

I've given him my promise.

PETER

When I kissed you, did you think of anything but me?

MARY ELLEN

No! no!

PETER

Where's your heart? Answer me. Ain't it right here by mine where it was a minute ago? Ain't it racin' to git back there? Won't it ache as long as you live if it's never goin' to lay there any more?

MARY ELLEN

My promise!

[*She has retreated from him and lays her hand on the pile of clothes on the barrel, glances down at them, pulls her hand away and cries out as if they scorched her.*]

PETER

His clo'es.

MARY ELLEN

How'd they come here?

PETER

I promised Anita I'd burn 'em.

MARY ELLEN

You talk about the past bein' dead. There they are, like a risin' out o' the past.

PETER

He never wanted ye to marry Buell.

MARY ELLEN

No. But they bring back the days an' nights when I grew old doin' for him, an' all them days an' nights I was true to Nathan Buell.

PETER

Two years o' that time you an' I were gittin' to love each other. We didn't know it. But so 'twas.

MARY ELLEN

Two years ain't twenty-six. An' I've promised.

PETER

Don't you love me?

MARY ELLEN

I'd die for you. Is that lovin' you?

PETER

Don't that give me rights over ye?

MARY ELLEN

I tell you I'd die for you. An' I'm doin' what's worse than death. I'm marryin' Nathan Buell.

PETER

[*In sudden understanding.*]

To buy the farm? You're buyin' it for me.

MARY ELLEN

Yes.

PETER

For me. You give yourself for me.

MARY ELLEN

I'd have give' myself twenty times over.

[*He draws her to him and kisses her. Jane comes out from the kitchen, stands a moment, looking at them, and Peter raises his head and stares at her. Mary Ellen follows his glance and turns to face her.*]

PETER

Jane!

MARY ELLEN

Jane! Jane, I never remembered you were in the world.

[*A burst of singing from the orchard, "Come, Lasses and Lads".*]

JANE

[*Coming down from the steps, halting a moment and then taking her way toward the orchard.*]

They're dancin'. You'd ought to be down there.

MARY ELLEN

Jane, what am I goin' to say to you?

JANE

I didn't ask you anything.

MARY ELLEN

I'd ruther you'd kill me than look like that.

PETER

[*To Jane.*]

No. Don't say anything to her. Say it to me.

JANE

You'd ought to be down there.

[*She goes off to the orchard.*]

MARY ELLEN

Why didn't she strike me down?

PETER

She didn't see—

MARY ELLEN

She did. What's in her mind?

PETER

I never know what's in her mind.

MARY ELLEN

I'm a bad woman, an' she's found it out.

PETER

I won't have you say that.

MARY ELLEN

It's true.

PETER

Don't you look down on what we feel for one another. It ain't a bad thing. It's a good thing.

MARY ELLEN

It's a terrible thing.

PETER

It's so big it's come out an' let us see it. An' now we've seen it we can take care of it. So't won't hurt you.

MARY ELLEN

The hurt's been done. To Jane.

PETER

It's the big dream, Mary Ellen—the birds an' the blooms an' you an' me.

MARY ELLEN

But there's Jane. Is Jane in the dream?

PETER

My God! Yes. Jane's in it. That's it.

[*Controlling himself.*]

Mary Ellen, we've got to do things. An' we've got to plan the way to do 'em.

[*Adam comes back, and goes to the bench at the end of the shed, ostensibly searching for something there, but only to keep away from the merrymaking.*]

ADAM

You shirking the crowd, too? You ought to go down, Peter. They're asking for you.

PETER

[*To Mary Ellen.*]

I've got to talk to Adam. Go into the kitchen. I won't be a minute.

[*He opens the door for her and she goes.*]

PETER

Adam, we've done with this place.

ADAM

You've lost the farm all right.

PETER

I'm goin' to git out.

ADAM

[*Going to Peter.*]

I'm with you there. Ready whenever you say the word.

PETER

'Twon't take me long to settle up.

ADAM

You'll have to sell your stock.

PETER

Likely. Jane won't want it.

ADAM

Jane? You going in advance?

PETER

I'm leavin' her.

ADAM

Not—

PETER

[*Savagely.*]

Yes. Leavin'—leavin'.

ADAM

You've told her?

PETER

No.

ADAM

Square deal?

PETER

D'ye think I'd go otherwise?

ADAM

Want to start out with me and see what we can make of it?

PETER

I'm not goin' alone.

ADAM

I know who the woman is, Pete.

PETER

Stop! You've said enough.

ADAM

The look on her face! That's why you can't do it. She's as simple-minded as a girl. You can't do it, Pete. You sha'n't.

PETER

Oh, yes, I shall.

ADAM

I won't let you.

PETER

I've let a good many things stand in my way first an last, but the man that stands in my way now—

ADAM

Well, what?

PETER

Adam, all I say is, don't you be that man.

[*They face each other for an instant, hostile and threatening.*]

ADAM

[*Getting hold of himself.*]

Pete, you and I can't scrap like kids. Wait till this crowd is gone and we'll talk it over. Better still, wait till to-morrow morning.

[*He walks off in a direction well away from the orchard and the "crowd".*]

PETER

To-morrer!

[*He goes to the kitchen door.*]

Mary Ellen!

[*Mary Ellen comes out.*]

Do you know what I'm goin' to tell Jane?

MARY ELLEN

No.

PETER

It's this. You're goin' away with me.

MARY ELLEN

Peter! You've lost your mind!

PETER

I'll give her every cent I've got in the world, an' to-morrer mornin' you an' I'll be free. We'll tramp an' I'll find work.

MARY ELLEN

Where?

PETER

Wherever I can. That'll settle it.

MARY ELLEN

[*In wonder.*]

You talk as if the world had been made over—new.

PETER

It has. It's our world now. We're goin' off to live in our own world.

MARY ELLEN

Runnin' away—with another woman's—

PETER

Yes. Run as the rivers run—to meet. Fly as the birds do, with their own true mates. Ain't you got the courage?

MARY ELLEN

I don't know whether it's courage that's drawin' me—

PETER

It's everything together. An' the word for it's love.

MARY ELLEN

You've crazed me. I've got to think.

PETER

You ain't got but one thing to do. Be ready. For to-night.

[*Singing from the orchard, "Come, Lasses and Lads", alternating with "Early One Morning".*]

MARY ELLEN

To-night?

PETER

After they're all in bed, slip out an' come down to Pine Tree Spring. You'll find me waitin' there. We'll stay till early train time.

MARY ELLEN

Shall we take—the train?

PETER

At the junction.

MARY ELLEN

Not the 6:20.

PETER

No. We don't want to start off from the depot here.

MARY ELLEN

No. Not Aaron's train.

PETER

[*With violence, to himself.*]

The only way to leave 'em is to go.

MARY ELLEN

Think o' her.

PETER

What's she care? No more'n that tree.

MARY ELLEN

But you're married to her.

PETER

Who married me to her? A man. God Almighty married me to you. When I looked at you, when I touched you, I knew. You're mine, Mary Ellen, you're mine.

MARY ELLEN

I can't be. You're in wedlock.

PETER

Ain't you been a prisoner all your life?

MARY ELLEN

Yes! Yes!

[*The singing comes nearer and nearer.*]

PETER

So's Jane a prisoner to me. I'm a prisoner to her. We're like birds pinin' all winter in a cage. An' now

the winter's over an' gone, an' the time o' the singin' o' birds is come. Mary Ellen, come.

[*The dancers rush in, singing the Apple Song to "Come, Lasses and Lads", with a mad abandon. They whirl about the Hale's Favorite, and suddenly Jane, her hair loose, her eyes frenzied, breaks from the circle. The singing and dancing stop. She calls wildly to Peter and Mary Ellen.*]

JANE

Come an' dance, Peter. Mary Ellen, come an' dance.

MARY ELLEN

[*Shrinking back.*]

No! No!

JANE

[*Seizing Mary Ellen's hand, putting it in Peter's, and holding it there. Laughing, with a loud, shrill note.*]

Come betwixt Peter and me. That's the way to dance, betwixt Peter and me. Come.

[*She dashes into the ring again, drawing them with her, and the dance sweeps round the Hale's Favorite.*]

CURTAIN

ACT III

Next morning. The woods at daybreak. Pine Tree Spring. MARY ELLEN *in a light, shimmering silk dress of an older time, carrying a rose-trimmed bonnet by the strings and with a wreath of white flowers on her arm, comes down a woodpath softly calling.*

MARY ELLEN

Are you awake? Peter! Are you awake?

PETER

[*Coming to meet her.*]

Course I'm awake.

[*They meet, kiss, and regard each other happily.*]

D'you sleep?

MARY ELLEN

No. Did you?

PETER

Never closed my eyes. I watched one star up there, an' when it sunk I knew 'twas almost day.

MARY ELLEN

I watched the star.

PETER

[*Laughing a little.*]

Funny.

MARY ELLEN

What?

PETER

Sometimes when I've had to git up to send off produce I've wished that fust train was an hour later. But now I wish 'twas earlier.

MARY ELLEN

I wished there was a train last night, so's we could be miles away by daybreak. How long 'fore we start from here?

PETER

'Most an hour. Can you wait a spell for breakfast?

MARY ELLEN

I ain't hungry. A drink o' water'll do for me.

[*She kneels at the spring and drinks out of her hand. Peter kneels beside her.*]

PETER

Give me some out o' your hands.

[*He drinks from her hand and they rise and look at each other smilingly, like children playing.*]

I might ha' thought to bring you somethin' to eat. Or told you to.

MARY ELLEN

I had hard work to slip away as 'twas.

PETER

D'you leave any word behind?

MARY ELLEN

I left a letter for Aaron. I put it by the lamp.

PETER

What d'you say in it?

MARY ELLEN

I told him I'd gone with you. I told him to break it to Nita an' go straight off, same as they meant to. So's they needn't face the neighbors.

PETER

The neighbors won't get hold on't yet.

MARY ELLEN

O Peter! Yes, they will. I told Nathan Buell.

PETER

When?

MARY ELLEN

Last night when I was comin' here. When I got to Cynthy Coleman's I thought how Nathan was layin' there in her best bed, an' I stepped up to the winder an' tapped on the screen, an' I says, "Here's somethin' for you." 'Twas his little ring an' chain. An' I laid

it on the sill. "I'm goin' off," I says, "with Peter Hale."

PETER

What d'you do that for?

MARY ELLEN

I dunno. I felt so light an' free. An' 'twas moonlight, an' you waitin' for me. An' I laughed.

PETER

Then he's begun to spread it. But he won't find one o' the neighbors'll believe him.

MARY ELLEN

Why not?

PETER

They wouldn't believe you could. Anybody't had lived the kind o' life you have.

MARY ELLEN

[*Wistfully.*]

Couldn't they, Peter? Couldn't they believe it?

PETER

Ye don't see what I mean. Nobody'd understand what 'tis to us. They couldn't. I was afraid Aaron'd keep ye up talkin'.

MARY ELLEN

He did. Till 'most midnight.

PETER

About the land?

MARY ELLEN

Yes.

PETER

D'you sign it over?

MARY ELLEN

Yes.

PETER

Let him have his land. We don't want it.

MARY ELLEN

Peter, twenty-six years ago this spring father set with me one whole night from ten to three, orderin' me to give up my will to his.

PETER

About Nate Buell.

MARY ELLEN

Yes. An' I give up. At three o'clock. I can hear that clock strike now. Jest as it struck a robin begun to sing. I thought I never should hear a robin ag'in without my heart stopped beatin'. But this mornin' I heard one. An' I laughed.

PETER

When you come up to me here last night the clock struck one. D'you notice?

MARY ELLEN

Yes. I wondered if you did.

PETER

Course I did.

MARY ELLEN

I thought to myself, " 'Tis one o'clock. It's a new day."

PETER

An' here's the day.

MARY ELLEN

An' I ain't the same woman I was yesterday, nor you ain't the same man.

PETER

I never see you look like this.

MARY ELLEN

It's mother's weddin' dress. Here's her bonnet, too.

PETER

Put it on.

[*She does it shyly.*]

A lily in a ring o' roses. That's what you be.

MARY ELLEN

Roses always—light anybody up.

PETER

It ain't the roses. 'Tis you. I couldn't see the roses last night, could I? But I see your face—under the moon.

MARY ELLEN

[*Laughing, with a timid coquetry and taking off the bonnet.*]
You didn't hardly speak to me.

PETER

I was afraid. There was the moon—an' you so wonderful.

MARY ELLEN

Did you think I laid there all night—on that blanket in the sweet fern? I only stayed there till you'd settled down. Then I crep' back ag'in. I knew where you'd be. Under the pines, on that knoll.

PETER

Yes. That's where I was.

MARY ELLEN

I crep' up to the other side, an' laid down on the pine needles, an' once I 'most laughed out to think you didn't know how near I was.

PETER

O, yes, I did.

MARY ELLEN

You did? D'you see me?

PETER

No. But I heard you breathe. An' I laid there an' drew my breath with yours, an' I says, "That's the way it'll always be, breathin' the same breath, thinkin' the same thoughts."

MARY ELLEN

What'd you think about?

PETER

You. All night long I thought o' you.

MARY ELLEN

An' I thought o' you.

PETER

An' the new day.

MARY ELLEN

Yes.

PETER

Not once of what we'd left behind?

MARY ELLEN

I did think of Nita. But Nita'll go away where folks never heard o' me. Tell me what else you thought.

PETER

I guess I thought of all the things I've saved for you.

MARY ELLEN

What are they, Peter?

[*They sit by the spring.*]

PETER

Things you never thought of. I didn't know I was savin' 'em, but I was.

MARY ELLEN

Oh, what were they?

PETER

Pretty words, pretty things to do for you. You're so fine an' soft an' sweet, you've got to have things nicer 'n any woman ever had before. What d'you make that wreath for?

MARY ELLEN

Somethin' to do 'fore I found you were awake.

PETER

You knew how you were goin' to look to me, so you made this.

[*He rises, crowns her with it and stands looking down at her.*]

A crown.

MARY ELLEN

Mebbe I wa'n't goin' to be beholden to pink roses. I took white blooms, so you could see me as I am.

PETER

ıte blooms. Then you'll be the rose.

MARY ELLEN

[*She rises.*]

Peter, I never've concerned much about my looks.

PETER

If you see yourself as you are now, you couldn't help it. There's somethin' come into your eyes—since yesterday—an' you're different. O Mary Ellen, you're like an apple tree in all her glory.

MARY ELLEN

You're different, too. I never see you like this.

PETER

It's because I've come alive.

MARY ELLEN

'Tain't only you an' me. You've made the whole world come alive. You say you've saved things for me. An' I've saved things for you. There never's been a minute when I could show what's in me waitin' to be born. I've kep' it all for you.

PETER

An' we'll speak out the thoughts we never've spoke before—

MARY ELLEN

Some we never knew we had—

PETER

An' we'll laugh—

MARY ELLEN

Peter, the birds! the birds! I'll dance for you.

[*She dances and then runs to him, shy and breathless, and hides her face on his shoulder.*]

PETER

Mary Ellen! Mary Ellen! I never knew you—danced.

MARY ELLEN

I ain't for years. One spell I used to dance alone, down in my bedroom when father'd gone to bed. Once he come to the door in his stockin' feet.

[*She runs to the spring.*]

But this ain't under anybody's roof. 'Tis the earth an' the sky an' the trees.

PETER

'Tis your own house, Mary Ellen. God made it for you.

[*Mary Ellen, laughing, bends over the spring. She gives a cry, draws back, snatches off the crown and throws it from her.*]

What is it, dear? What is it?

MARY ELLEN

In the spring.

PETER

What's in there?

MARY ELLEN

[*Wildly.*]

No! no! don't look. But 'tain't there now. My face.

PETER

Why, yes, you see yourself. That's all.

MARY ELLEN

My face. I see my face.

[*Shuddering.*]

There was the crown, an' my face under it. Peter, I'm old.

PETER

Don't ye look in lyin' water when there's my eyes you can look into. Don't you tremble so.

MARY ELLEN

[*Getting hold of herself and laughing in bravado.*]

What if I am—old? What if we were so old we didn't even have much time together? Ain't this one minute with you worth all the years I've lived?

PETER

Don't look back. Look forrard.

[*As if humoring a child.*]

Now you listen while I tell you how it's all goin' to be.

[*They sit by the spring.*]

MARY ELLEN

Tell me, Peter.

PETER

I know a town where I'm remembered. We'll hire a little house, an' there we'll live.

MARY ELLEN

Live. In a house with you.

PETER

Yes. An' I shall be away all day workin', an' you'll be workin' at home—

MARY ELLEN

Home.

PETER

An' at night I shall open the gate an' come up the path—

MARY ELLEN

An' I shall hear you comin'—

PETER

An' you'll open the door, an' I shall call. An' you'll run down the path—oh, I can see you now betwixt the rows o' larkspur—an' I shall have the whole world in my arms.

MARY ELLEN

Tell more about the house.

PETER

[*In mock despair.*]

She wants the house. She don't want me.

MARY ELLEN

Don't I—my lord?

PETER

What make you call me that?

MARY ELLEN

They do—in the Bible. It's what you are—my lord.

PETER

It is her house. An' it's her garden too.

MARY ELLEN

I never had much of a garden. Them long beds o' mine were 'most too gravelly.

PETER

'Twon't be gravel where we're goin'.

MARY ELLEN

I guess I shall want two long beds, anyways, same as mine leadin' down to the gate. I admire long beds each side the path.

PETER

Course you'll have long beds.

MARY ELLEN

Come five o'clock, d'you ever notice how nice the sun lays acrost the pinks in them two beds o' mine?

PETER

It's goin' to lay in every corner o' your new garden some part o' the day. There won't be a foot of it that ain't a-bloom. Poppies—can't you see 'em blowin' in the wind? An' flower-de-luce. An' monkshood, straight an' tall. An' hollyhocks. An' pinies, red as blood. An' all June the roses. But no rose'll hold a candle to you, you'll be so pink an' pretty.

MARY ELLEN

I sha'n't be like the roses.

PETER

No. You're too delicate an' fine. You're a madonna lily, white as snow.

MARY ELLEN

[*In rapt wonder.*]

White as snow.

PETER

But sweet. The scent of 'em's almost more'n a man can bear. Now you tell.

MARY ELLEN

[*Timidly.*]

What shall I?

PETER

I've told the garden. You tell the house.

MARY ELLEN

[*Reflecting.*]

Well! We've made the garden, ain't we?

PETER

Yes. For you to walk in summer days.

MARY ELLEN

For you to look at when we have our suppers on the porch.

PETER

For us to smell by night.

MARY ELLEN

The garden's ours. But the house is yours.

PETER

It's your house, Mary Ellen.

MARY ELLEN

I dunno's I'd ask anything better'n the old house I've took care of so many years—if it had more closet room. Or another cupboard by the pantry door. What you laughin' at?

PETER

Here we are with the world before us an' we can't think up anything better'n your old house an' garden.

MARY ELLEN

Why, yes, I guess the old house'd do well enough, so fur's that goes. I can't think of anything better'n livin' there with you—

[*She stops, aghast, and then resolutely dismisses the picture she has called up.*]

Anyways, whatever house 'tis, everything I do in it's done for you. All day long, while I'm makin' it nice, I think of you. The floors can't be clean enough for you to walk on. An' the winders can't be clear enough for you to see through. An' your clo'es will be hangin' round, an' when I go by the nail where your old coat is, I'll put my cheek ag'inst it.

PETER

An' you'll sing at your work. An' sometimes when I'm workin' near the house I shall hear you—

MARY ELLEN

Sing! I ain't sung for years.

PETER

An' I'll say your name, an' drop my tools an' run, an' there you'll be, singin'. An' you'll see me, an' stop short, an' I'll hold out my arms—

[*Suddenly Jane's voice, strident, dreadful, comes from the woods in a mad outcry. Mary Ellen and Peter rise.*]

MARY ELLEN

What's that?

PETER

You know who 'tis.

MARY ELLEN

Jane.

PETER

Yes.

MARY ELLEN

Where's she goin'?

PETER

Over to your house.

MARY ELLEN

By the short cut.

PETER

What's she goin' there for?

MARY ELLEN

I thought yesterday she never'd darken them doors ag'in.

PETER

Git out o' sight.

MARY ELLEN

No, Peter. I sha'n't hide.

PETER

Step in an' let her pass.

MARY ELLEN

No, Peter, no. What we're doin' we'll do in the sight o' man as well as God.

PETER

You can't do her no good, an' 'twill do you both harm. Hear it. When a woman screams like that you'd better stan' from under.

MARY ELLEN

Is she—

PETER

In liquor? No. But she'll have it 'fore night. I've seen her crazed. But not like this.

[*The cry ceases.*]

MARY ELLEN

She's stopped.

PETER

She'll begin ag'in. Mary Ellen, I won't have you meet. Ain't you goin' to mind me? If ye don't, I'll carry ye by main force.

MARY ELLEN

[*Listening.*]

Hark! There's somebody else.

PETER

Which way?

MARY ELLEN

There.

PETER

Git into the bushes.

[*Jane, wild and haggard, comes through the woodpath. She listens and then runs to the big pine by the spring and throws herself upon it, her desperate hands clutching at the bark like the claws of a climbing animal. She listens, steps cautiously to the other side of the tree and hides. Uncle Eph comes through the wood, absorbed in pursuit of her. He listens and then steals up to the tree and, with a childish laugh at his own cleverness, discovers her.*]

JANE

[*Stepping out from hiding.*]

Ain't I got red o' you? You've follered me all night long, an' when I've shook you off there you'd be ag'in, buzzin' round my ears.

EPH

[*In crack-brained delight at his own cunning.*]

Time an' ag'in I thought I'd lost ye, ye kep' so still. I'd get me laid down, but ye couldn't bust out singin' afore I'd rise up an' foller ye. An' every time you'd sing, I had to dance.

JANE

You're enough to drive anybody crazy.

EPH

[*Vaguely troubled.*]

Don't ye say that word.

JANE

What do you s'pose I come out into the woods for, if 'twa'n't to be by myself an' git a chance to breathe?

EPH

[*Confidentially.*]

Mebbe ye come to— There's a terrible sight o' trees in the woods if anybody only had a rope.

[*He goes to the spring and, sitting, peers into it.*]

An' there's this water here—though I dunno's it's deep enough.

JANE

Come, be off.

EPH

There's a lot o' ways folks can do it, if they only thought so. I wish they would so's I could see. I dunno how many years I've wanted to do it, an' I dunno how it's done.

JANE

Be off. I won't have you taggin' me.

[*She picks up a stone and threatens him.*]

EPH

[*He dodges instinctively and then, finding she really isn't going to throw, calls in high delight.*]

You throw an' I'll ketch.

[*Jane drops the stone. He splashes the water with his hand, in childish pleasure.*]

Water! Water! I'll hold your head under 'f I git the courage, an' you can drownd an' I'll see how it's done.

JANE

Look here! I'm goin' now, an' if I hear you follerin' me—

EPH

[*Going to her with his wistful air of wanting to "play".*]

Ye goin'? Then ye sing as ye go, an' we'll both dance.

JANE

I can't dance.

EPH

Then you sing for me.

JANE

I can't sing.

EPH

Wa'n't ye singin' jest now?

JANE

Yes. If you call it that.

[*Her voice breaking, she goes to the pine and cowers against it.*]

To keep from screamin'.

EPH

Oh, ye mustn't scream.

JANE

Why not?

EPH

If ye scream, they'll say ye're crazy, an' the boys'll run after ye—the little devils—an' the womenfolks'll say, Poor soul! No, don't ye scream.

JANE

If you felt as I do, you'd have to scream.

[*Leaving the pine, picking up the wreath and speaking absently to herself.*]

Look at this.

EPH

What is it? A ring-a-round-a-rosy!

JANE

Some girl made it, an' wore it on her head. An' she's got everything before her. An' here be I, an' what have I got before me?

[*She throws it down.*]

EPH

I dunno what ye mean.

JANE

Course ye don't. D'ye s'pose I could open my lips to anybody't did know?

EPH

D'ye s'pose ye've got a broken heart?

JANE

No. I've got no heart to break. I've drowned it in liquor. That's what I've done. It's drownded.

[*She returns to the pine and stands leaning against it, absorbed in her thoughts and looking down into the spring.*]

EPH

[*Wisely.*]

Then if ye ain't got no heart, there can't nothin' hurt ye.

[*He picks up the wreath.*]

JANE

Can't it?

EPH

So you put on the ring-a-round-a-rosy.

JANE

No.

EPH

An' we'll dance.

JANE

No.

EPH

An' sing—

JANE

No, I tell you, no.

EPH

[*Dropping the wreath in a wistful discontent.*]

If ye won't dance nor sing, what will ye do?

JANE

I dunno what I'm goin' to do. Git drunk—or kill myself.

EPH

[*Eagerly.*]

That's the talk! That's what I said. Kill yourself. You do it, an' I'll see how it's done. I've been kind o' 'fraid to do it, unless I knew—the rules. An' here's suthin' for you to do it with.

[*He takes out a big clasp knife and opens it.*]

It's my knife. I was goin' to cut rushes to make me a hat.

[*He offers it to her persuasively.*]

JANE

You put that back in your pocket. Don't ye offer it to me.

EPH

You do it. You do it.

[*He lays it in her hand. The bushes move where Peter is on guard.*]

JANE

[*Looking at the knife in an unwilling fascination.*]

Is it sharp?

EPH

God sakes! I guess 'tis.

JANE

Would it cut right through?

EPH

Bone an' all. You try it. On your broken heart. If ye don't make out, 'twon't do ye no hurt. There's no wuth to a broken heart. Here, I guess you better give me suthin' to bind over my eyes, so's I sha'n't see ye fall.

[*He retreats from her, shielding his eyes with his lifted arm.*]
[*Jane comes awake, throws the knife to the ground, and sinks at the foot of the tree in a violent sobbing.*]

JANE

No! no! I can't. I can't.

EPH

[*Aggrieved, picking up his knife and trying the edge.*]

Well, ye needn't dull up my good knife. Now what ye cryin' for? If ye'd put the knife into ye, ye couldn't cry no more nor what ye're cryin' now.

JANE

[*Rising to her knees.*]

God A'mighty! what am I doin' here, anyway? I've got to go back an' git Barstow's breakfast.

[*She rises.*]

EPH

[*Proffering the knife.*]

You do it.

JANE

[*She brushes off her dress and pats her hair into decency.*]

I can't, I tell ye. I've got to go an' git breakfast.

EPH

Well, if you're goin', you sing as ye go, an' le'me dance.

JANE

I sha'n't sing no more.

[*She goes off by a woodpath and Uncle Eph, after a moment's puzzled consideration, trots happily after her.*]

[*Peter and Mary Ellen come out from hiding.*]

MARY ELLEN

D'you ever see her cry like that?

PETER

No. She ain't a cryin' woman.

MARY ELLEN

She ain't looked so either. I dunno's I ever see her look so.

PETER

Liquor'll be the next thing.

MARY ELLEN

She's bound for it now.

PETER

Yes.

MARY ELLEN

After she's got breakfast: D'you hear that?

PETER

Yes.

MARY ELLEN

Then she'll feel free to wander away. An' drink. How she cried!

PETER

God!

MARY ELLEN

D'you tell her last night?

PETER

Yes.

MARY ELLEN

What'd she say?

PETER

Not one word.

MARY ELLEN

An' now she's goin' to git breakfast. I hope she'll have the house shut up 'fore Nathan's there. I never thought—maybe Nita'll hear it first from him.

PETER

You think Jane'll stay an' shut the house?

MARY ELLEN

She's a real caretaker.

[*Absently.*]

I hope she'll put Trot out.

PETER

The cat'll be all right.

MARY ELLEN

Her kittens are up in the shed chamber. I guess Jane'd remember to leave the door.

PETER

My God! Do you know what we're doin'? We're standin' here talkin' about the chores, an' it's daylight —an' we're goin' off together—

MARY ELLEN

An' Jane wants to git drunk—or kill herself—but she's gone back to git breakfast.

PETER

Do you think for a minute this thing means to her what it does to us?

MARY ELLEN

No.

PETER

Do you think she wants to kill herself because she's —left behind?

MARY ELLEN

No. Not that. But it's everything together. It's her cravin', like a devil inside her. An' there was you an' me to fight the devil, an' we're gone. An' she's alone. But she's hoein' out her row.

PETER

What's the matter with us? Nothin' looks the same.

MARY ELLEN

Even this place don't look the same. The flowers don't.

[*She snatches up the wreath, tears it apart, and throws it into the spring.*]

PETER

What you doin' with that?

MARY ELLEN

Buryin' it where nobody'll see it die, an' where I sha'n't see it. Even that looks different.

PETER

Do I—look different?

MARY ELLEN

Do I?

PETER

Don't you love me?

MARY ELLEN

Dearer'n my life.

PETER

Don't you want to be with me?

MARY ELLEN

Not that way, the way we thought.

PETER

Don't you want our house?

MARY ELLEN

Not that way.

PETER

Nor the garden? An' you waitin' at the gate?

MARY ELLEN

Not if we have to walk over her to git it.

PETER

The first step's taken. We have walked over her.

MARY ELLEN

Yes. We've stepped right on her an' left her in the dust. An' what's she done? She's got up, all bruised an' bleedin', an' gone to do the work she said she'd do.

PETER

What's bruised her? She don't feel to me as a woman feels to a man.

MARY ELLEN

She can't. The liquor's killed it out of her. But she's got somethin' left. She stan's by. An' so must we.

PETER

Have I got to see you go back there an' give up your will to other folks?

MARY ELLEN

'Tis because I've got a will I'm goin'.

PETER

To see you work an' slave—

MARY ELLEN

The work's nothin'.

PETER

Never to have your life—

MARY ELLEN

Why, Peter, we've both had our life. This one day.

PETER

Spring. An' no time for ripenin'. O my God!

MARY ELLEN

Don't you tell me the world ain't mine as much as 't was an hour ago. An' yours. Why, Peter, here we be, free to go either way we say. Which way we goin'? You're the man. You've got to be the strongest.

PETER

Yes. I could make you go—by main force, anyway.

[*They look each other in the eyes, Peter in a fierce passion, Mary Ellen unyieldingly.*]

MARY ELLEN

Which way we goin'?

[*She waits for him to answer.*]

Ain't we goin' back?

PETER

[*With a long breath.*]

Yes.

[*They turn and he stops short.*]

We can't go back.

MARY ELLEN

Why can't we?

PETER

There's Nate Buell. He's told folks.

MARY ELLEN

O my Lord!

PETER

You sha'n't face it. I won't let you.

MARY ELLEN

It never'll be forgotten, so long as we live—nor after. How Mary Ellen Barstow run away.

PETER

Damn 'em.

MARY ELLEN

They'll p'int us out to strangers. In the Meetin' House. "That was the woman that run away."

PETER

'Twon't mean to them what it does to us.

MARY ELLEN

No. 'Twill mean—the worst.

PETER

They'll make it hell for you.

MARY ELLEN

Yes. There'd be nothin' like it

PETER

You can't face it. Nor I for you.

MARY ELLEN

Nor I for you.

PETER

That settles it. Come.

[*They turn to go, but Mary Ellen stops.*]

MARY ELLEN

But Jane! Jane's facin' it. She's gone back there —to git breakfast. Peter, we're goin' back.

PETER

[*After a moment's struggling thought.*]

Yes, we're goin' back.

[*They turn to the homeward path and go off, Mary Ellen leading.*]

CURTAIN

ACT IV

The same morning a little later, in the Barstow sitting-room. The shutters are still closed and the lamp is on the table. Near the lamp is MARY ELLEN'S *note. The basket of pewter is by the sideboard, on the floor.* JANE *comes in from the kitchen, goes to* MARY ELLEN'S *bedroom door, listens, opens it a crack and closes it. She goes to the table to take the lamp to the sideboard, sees* MARY ELLEN'S *note, looks at it and puts it in her pocket. As she is setting the lamp on the sideboard a whistle is heard outside.* JANE *goes out to the kitchen. Again the whistle outside and* ANITA *comes in from the hall, whistling an answer. She carries a charming négligée over her arm. She runs to the window and opens the shutter a little.*

ANITA

That you, Adam?

ADAM

[*His tone is curt and anxious.*]

Yes.

ANITA

I heard you whistling under my window. I came as quick as I could.

ADAM

I thought you'd know that whistle.

ANITA

Did you mean it for a serenade? Didn't you hear me answer? I couldn't believe you'd let me go without saying good-bye.

ADAM

Can I come in?

ANITA

I'm not quite dressed.

[*She slips on the négligée over her dress to make herself as pretty as possible.*]

Do you know what time it is? I came very near seeing the sun rise.

ADAM

Is your father up?

ANITA

Yes. Dressing.

ADAM

Hurry, Nita. Let me in.

ANITA

Why, how serious we are! Anything the matter?

ADAM

Let me in, Nita. I've got to see you before your father comes.

ANITA

Something *is* the matter.

ADAM

Yes.

ANITA

[*In evident disappointment she takes off the négligée and lays it on the table by the door.*]

You sound as if it was—business.

ADAM

I'm not fooling now. Let me in.

[*She runs to the outer door and lets him in. He is grave and in a high state of tension.*]

I want you to get your father away on the 6:20.

ANITA

We're going, anyway. Mrs. Coleman's coming for us.

ADAM

You mustn't wait for that. Tell your father she's going to be late and you've both got to walk over there. I'll carry your bags.

ANITA

We haven't had breakfast.

ADAM

He'll have to go without his breakfast.

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen wouldn't let him.

ADAM

Anita, do you trust me enough to do just what I tell you?

ANITA

Yes. What's happened, Adam?

ADAM

Peter's gone.

ANITA

Peter? Gone where?

ADAM

God knows. Gone for good.

ANITA

Left the farm?

ADAM

Yes.

ANITA

When did you know?

ADAM

Last night. Between twelve and one. Buell waked me—

ANITA

Mr. Buell?

ADAM

Waked me, hammering on the door. There he stood, primed. Said Pete had run off. I told him to go back to bed. He wouldn't. Swore Pete wasn't on the place.

ANITA

And wasn't he?

ADAM

No. Nor Jane.

ANITA

Then they'd gone together.

ADAM

Not together. Wherever she is, it's not with him. He's gone and left her. I'm afraid he's left her for good.

ANITA

You mean—deserted her? How dreadful! But you can't wonder. How did Mr. Buell know?

ADAM

Never mind. He knew. But I've got to keep him from telling anybody else.

ANITA

Where is he?

ADAM

I made him stay up in my room while I dressed. Locked him in with me. Talked at him—blue streak.

Anything to tire him out. Ten minutes ago he dozed off. Then I crept out, locked him in, locked the outside door and sprinted for here. And there's half a chance he won't get out till we've rushed your father off.

ANITA

But if you've locked him in—

ADAM

Oh, he'll break jail. It'll take him a minute or two, but once he's out he'll be here like a shot. Now call your father.

ANITA

What's father got to do with it?

ADAM

Nita, if Pete's gone, your Aunt Mary Ellen's gone with him. Buell knows. That's why he was trailing Pete.

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen? What do you mean?

ADAM

I knew about it yesterday. They'd got it planned. Pete told me.

ANITA

Adam, you mustn't say a thing like that.

ADAM

They planned it. He told me so. But I didn't really take it in.

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen? Oh, you're perfectly crazy.

ADAM

You needn't believe it. I don't want you to. All I want you to do is to get your father away from here before Buell sees him.

ANITA

It's that horrible man. She'd promised to marry him and she was beside herself. She's got Peter to take her away.

ADAM

I'm afraid that's only half the story. Nita, they're in love.

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen! I won't believe it.

[*She runs to the bedroom door, calling.*]

Aunt Mary Ellen!

ADAM

[*Stopping her.*]

Sh! Don't let your father know. Get him away. Then I'll hunt for them.

ANITA

He won't go without seeing her.

ADAM

Make him.

ANITA

What could I tell him?

ADAM

Tell him—she's been called away.

ANITA

Do you suppose I'd leave this house without knowing where Aunt Mary Ellen is? And do you believe I think for a minute she's not in there?

ADAM

You're afraid she isn't. If you weren't you'd be in there like a shot.

[*She hesitates and goes to him in a momentary doubt and terror.*]

Open the door, Nita. Get it over.

[*She leaves him and gets herself in hand.*]

Wait. If you find her bed hasn't been slept in, will you do what I tell you, bluff your father, bluff Buell if you have to, and get them away? It's a big game of bluff from now on. Understand?

ANITA

[*Going to the bedroom door.*]

Yes.

ADAM

Now.

ANITA

[*Knocking softly.*]

Aunt Mary Ellen!

ADAM

Sh! there's your father.

[*Anita leaves the bedroom door and Adam opens the hall door to let in Aaron, laden with bags and wraps.*]

AARON

[*As he enters, ungraciously to Adam.*]

Well, young man, you round here? You're out early.

[*To Anita.*]

You left your bag up in your room. Here's your coat an' hat. Where's your aunt?

ANITA

We've got to hurry, father.

[*She begins putting on her coat and hat.*]

ADAM

Yes, you're to walk over to the Colemans' and start from there.

[*He takes up the bags.*]

These all, Mr. Barstow?

AARON

You set them bags down.

[*To Anita.*]

Where's Mary Ellen?

[*Adam sets down the bags.*]

ANITA

Don't you understand, father? We've got to walk over to the Colemans'. That's why we're starting now. Come.

AARON

Why ain't breakfast on the table?

ADAM

There's a dining car on your train, Mr. Barstow.

AARON

[*To Anita.*]

What's your aunt mean by sendin' me out o' this house without my breakfast?

[*He is on his way to the kitchen door when Anita stops him.*]

ANITA

Father, Aunt Mary Ellen—isn't here.

AARON

Ain't here? Where is she?

[*Nathan, trembling with rage and haste, comes in at the hall door.*]

NATHAN

[*Launching his wrath at Adam.*]

Ye fastened me in, did ye, like a dumb beast? Ye thought I was too infirm to climb down over the shed roof. Ye left me asleep, did ye? Well, you're the one 'twas left. Aaron Barstow, Mary Ellen's gone off.

AARON

Gone off? She's goin' with us.

[*To Anita.*]

Ain't she packed her bag?

[*He starts toward the bedroom door, but Anita detains him.*]

ANITA

Father!

NATHAN

Goin' with you! That's a good one. She's gone all right. But 'tain't with you.

AARON

Gone?

NATHAN

Yes, gone. I see her go.

AARON

When'd she go?

NATHAN

Last night.

AARON

Why, she set here with me till—

NATHAN

'Twixt twelve an' one suthin' come tappin' on my screen. An' then I heerd a voice, an' 'twas Mary Ellen's voice an' it says, "I'm goin' off."

AARON

Oh, you were asleep an' dreamin'.

NATHAN

I got up an' looked out the winder an' there she was slippin' through the moonlight like a shadder. 'Twas Mary Ellen. I'd known her amongst a thousand.

ANITA

You didn't know her yesterday, Mr. Buell. What if it was I you saw—

NATHAN

Ye can't fool me. She run off last night. She's gone. An' she called out to me, "I'm goin' off with Peter Hale."

AARON

Nate, you're a born fool.

NATHAN

She was out of her head over that feller. D'you ever hear a Christian woman talk as she did down in his yard no longer ago'n yesterday?

ADAM

Oh, Mr. Buell!

NATHAN

[*To Adam.*]

Yes, an' you knew it, too. You locked me in to give 'em time. Smooth-tongued devils, both on ye!

[*To Aaron.*]

Mary Ellen's run off, an' she's run off with Peter Hale. If she ain't with him, where is he? He's gone. You ask this smart Alec here that locks folks up an' lets 'em climb down over shed roofs. He can't deny it.

AARON

[*To Adam.*]

Where is Hale?

ADAM

Couldn't say, Mr. Barstow.

NATHAN

Mary Ellen's run off, an' she's run off with Peter Hale. Here, ain't that Mary Ellen's bedroom? Look in there an' see if the bed's been slep' in. She ain't been there all night long.

ANITA

You're not going into Aunt Mary Ellen's room.

[*She draws a chair before the bedroom door and seats herself in it.*]

NATHAN

If she ain't slep' in that room, that tells the whole story.

ANITA

Nobody is going to open the door of Aunt Mary Ellen's room.

AARON

Git up, Nita.

ANITA

Father, I won't have him peering in there. What is it to him where Aunt Mary Ellen is?

[*She rises, but still stands before her barricade.*]

He hasn't been here a day, and we all hate him, every one of us. And if she's hidden herself away from him, I don't blame her. It's what any woman would do.

AARON

Nita, you come away from there.

ANITA

No, father, that man sha'n't look inside Aunt Mary Ellen's room.

AARON

Nita!

[*Jane comes in from the kitchen and goes directly to the bedroom door, where Anita instinctively gives place to her.*]

JANE

What you crowded round that door for, like a parcel o' wolves? What do you think you're goin' to find? If you want to know anything, you come to me.

AARON

Ah!

[*To Nathan.*]

She's the one. Hale's wife!

[*To Jane.*]

Where's my sister?

JANE

Gone out.

AARON

Where?

JANE

To one o' the neighbors.

AARON

How'd ye know?

JANE

She told me.

AARON

Where'd ye see her?

JANE

Here.

NATHAN

In this room?

JANE

Yes.

NATHAN

When was it?

JANE

Half an hour ago—twenty minutes—maybe.

NATHAN

[*Trying to readjust his point of view.*]

Then she come back.

JANE

Come back from where? She come out o' her bedroom here.

NATHAN

[*Taking the cross-examination on himself.*]

Jest up, was she?

JANE

Yes.

NATHAN

Slep' there last night, did she, same as usual?

JANE

Yes.

NATHAN

In all night?

JANE

Yes.

NATHAN

What makes ye think so?

JANE

I was here last night myself.

NATHAN

All night?

JANE

Yes.

NATHAN

Where?

JANE

Here. In this room.

NATHAN

How long d'ye stay here?

JANE

All night, I told ye.

NATHAN

Set up all night.

AARON

That's a likely story. What'd ye do that for?

JANE

I didn't want to disturb folks, goin' upstairs. I come in late.

AARON

Ye didn't come in 'fore midnight. I locked the doors myself as the clock struck twelve.

JANE

'Twas after twelve.

NATHAN

How much after?

JANE

Five minutes—maybe ten.

AARON

The doors were locked. How'd you git in?

JANE

Mary Ellen let me in.

NATHAN

Got up out o' bed, did she, an' let you in?

JANE

Yes.

NATHAN

'Twixt twelve an' one.

JANE

Yes.

AARON

[*To Nathan.*]

If she set here all night, Mary Ellen couldn't ha' got out 'thout her knowin' it.

NATHAN

Unless she went by the winder.

JANE

[*In momentary dismay.*]

The winder!

[*Recovering herself in triumph.*]

The screen's nailed in.

NATHAN

Aaron, we've got to see whether that bed's been slep' in. If it ain't, it's because Mary Ellen no sooner got red o' you than she put for the road.

[*To Jane.*]

You come away from that door, or I'll make ye.

ADAM

Let her alone, Buell.

AARON

[*To Jane.*]

Step away from the door.

ANITA

Father, don't.

NATHAN

[*Pointing a lean forefinger at Anita and Jane.*]

Aaron, them two's in league together. That bed ain't been slep' in an' they know it.

AARON

[*To Jane.*]

Come. I don't want nobody to lay hands on ye, but ye've got to git away from that door.

JANE

S'pose I do git away from the door. S'pose ye find the bed made up. D'ye think ye'll be much better off? Then look.

[*She throws open the door and walks stolidly away to the table.*]

NATHAN

Aha! What'd I tell ye? Quilt all spread up an' a clean piller case an' not a wrinkle in it. What d'ye think now?

JANE

[*Triumphantly.*]

I made the bed.

AARON

When?

JANE

Jest now.

AARON

Mebbe she did, Nathan. Ye can't prove it.

NATHAN

Mebbe I can't.

[*To Jane.*]

You take your oath you come into this house 'twixt twelve an' one?

JANE

Yes.

NATHAN

An' Mary Ellen let you in.

JANE

Yes.

NATHAN

What'd she do then?

JANE

Went back to bed.

NATHAN

An' you set here all night.

JANE

Yes. Till half an hour ago.

NATHAN

[*With sudden violence.*]

You're lyin'. Ye've lied right through.

JANE

[*With answering violence.*]

Don't you tell me I lie.

NATHAN

I can prove it. Mary Ellen was in the road last night. I see her an' she spoke to me.

AARON

Ye dreamed that, Nate.

JANE

[*Jeeringly.*]

Aha! Who's lyin' now?

NATHAN

[*Taking out the ring and chain.*]

Is this a dream? She laid it on my winder sill an' she says, "'Here's suthin' for ye." 'Twas the ring I give her—an' the chain. You know it, Aaron. Years ago.

AARON

[*To Jane.*]

You've been lyin'.

NATHAN

Lyin'. As fast as she could speak. Look at her face. Look at her face.

[*Jane covers her face with her hands.*]

ANITA

Father! She's been crying.

AARON

[*To Jane.*]

What d'ye cry for?

NATHAN

[*With biting emphasis.*]

She cried because she knows it. Her husband's run off with Mary Ellen Barstow.

[*Jane staggers and catches at a chair to steady herself.*]

AARON

[*To Jane.*]

Godfrey! You ain't been drinkin'?

JANE

[*Laughing wildly.*]

Drinkin'! That's it. Drinkin'! Drinkin'! The cravin' come on me last night. An' Mary Ellen see it. An' she follered me. An' she got Peter, an' they both follered me. An' they follered me all night. All night long they follered me up an' down an' through the mist. But I give 'em the slip. I give 'em the slip.

AARON

What d'ye lie for, then?

JANE

D'ye think I'd owned it if he hadn't trapped me? If I could throw you two off the track, don't you think I'd ruther lie than eat? Ye thought ye had her, didn't ye? Thought ye'd git her in the trap? But it's me you've trapped, an' if ye want the truth I'll spit it at ye. I'm a drinkin' woman, an' Mary Ellen knows it, an' she's lookin' for me now, mebbe miles away. An' if she never comes back, it's no more'n you two deserve. An' I don't stay in this house another minute. I'm goin' off after her.

[*She turns, glances from the window, and cries out in wild relief.*]

They're comin'! They're comin'! There's Peter. There they be.

[*She runs to the hall door to meet them.*]

NATHAN

[*Peering from the window.*]

Heads as high as ninety.

JANE

[*At the hall door, to Peter and Mary Ellen.*]

They ain't gone yet. You're jest in time.

[*Peter and Mary Ellen come in, and Jane continues, with meaning emphasis.*]

I've told 'em the whole story. I've told 'em how you thought I was off after liquor, an' how you hunted for me all night long. I've said all there is to say.

[*She takes the letter from her pocket and gives it to Mary Ellen.*]

Here. I found it.

[*She goes out to the kitchen.*]

AARON

[*Stolidly relieved at having the commotion over.*]

Well, Mary Ellen, you've got back.

ANITA

[*Going to Mary Ellen, kissing her, and touching the wedding dress caressingly.*]

Pretty.

ADAM

[*To Peter.*]

Well, old man.

NATHAN

Mary Ellen, ye've been out all night, an' it's well ye've got back as ye have. Ye can't go kickin' over the traces like that 'thout causin' talk.

PETER

[*Striding forward and confronting him.*]

Buell, you look here. An' listen. If there is any talk I shall know where it comes from, an' deal with you accordin'. Understand me? I guess you understand.

[*Peter goes out at the hall door.*]

NATHAN

[*Cringing momentarily.*]

I didn't mean no harm. I was goin' to overlook it anyways.

[*Nathan turns to Mary Ellen.*]

Now I'm goin' to the street an' have that deed made out.

[*He becomes aware of the ring and chain in his hand and holds them up before her.*]

What d'ye mean by that?

MARY ELLEN

Keep it, Nathan. I don't love you. Nor you don't love me. 'Twas all the land.

NATHAN

Love? What d'ye expect, at our age? But a promise is a promise. An' land is land. And I

hereby lay my commands on ye, as my wife that is to be, that ye keep in your name all lots an' passels o' land that's standin' in your name now.

MARY ELLEN

You're too late, Nathan. I've signed it all away.

NATHAN

[*Anguished.*]

Ye ain't gone an' stripped yourself of all that land —acre upon acre o' wood an' tillage—

MARY ELLEN

Every inch of it. But I've got the paper that binds you to sell me Mill Road Farm.

NATHAN

Then for God's sake, Aaron, you let her have that. Let her have Mill Road Farm. Advance her the money, Aaron. Give it to her right out. She's your own sister, Aaron. Only think o' that.

MARY ELLEN

Nathan, if he did I shouldn't take it.

NATHAN

Then that's the last word I've got to say. Marry ye? I wouldn't marry ye if ye should beseech me to. You ain't a Christian woman.

[*He goes out at the hall door, shaking with righteous indignation.*]

AARON

If ever I see two such fools—all this hurrah-boys over nothin'. Godfrey! Betwixt you an' that Hale woman an' Cynthy Coleman laggin' behind, I ain't got time to swaller down a cup o' coffee. Mary Ellen, you put on your bunnit, an' come along jest as you be.

[*He goes to the desk and begins a final rearrangement of his bag.*]

MARY ELLEN

Go—with you?

[*She lifts the basket of pewter to the table and begins unwrapping the pewter and setting it back in its old place on the shelf.*]

AARON

That's what I said.

ADAM

[*At the window.*]

Here's Cynthia Coleman with the team. She's on time, after all.

AARON

[*To Mary Ellen, who is still busy with the pewter.*]

What ye 'bout there?

MARY ELLEN

I'm puttin' gran'mother's pewter back on the shelves where it belongs.

AARON

Godfrey! your voice sounded for all the world like mother's that time father licked me for givin' away my five cents.

MARY ELLEN

I guess mother'd like to have me keep my pewter. Aaron, my mind's made up.

AARON

Well, you think it over. You'll feel different by to-morrer.

[*Cynthia comes in at the hall door.*]

[*Mary Ellen and Anita go off to Mary Ellen's bedroom for last words.*]

CYNTHIA

You ready, folks?

ADAM

I'll put these in the carry-all.

[*He carries out the bags.*]

AARON

[*To Cynthia.*]

Thought you were goin' to be late.

CYNTHIA

[*Running over with talk to which nobody ever listens.*]

I'm a mite early, if anything. Seems's if everything's happenin' to once. I dunno which way to turn. I've

been at it sence daybreak, scourin' tins an' lookin' over things up attic—never see so many old daguerreotypes—didn't know there was so many in the world—an' squash seeds—an' foot-warmers—an' old clo'es. We've got a swarm o' bees to dispose of. Aaron, I wonder'f you could make use of a swarm o' bees? No, I s'pose not, livin' in the city so. Well, I'll be climbin' in.

[*She hurries out at the hall door as Adam enters.*]

[*Mary Ellen and Anita come back from the bedroom.*]

AARON

Godfrey! this place is hornets' nest enough for me. Well, good-bye, Mary Ellen.

MARY ELLEN

Good-bye, Aaron.

[*Aaron goes out, his mind already on "business". Anita, without a look at Adam, follows.*]

MARY ELLEN

[*To Adam.*]

I'm terrible sorry, Adam, she's gone off like this.

ADAM

Not even said good-bye.

[*In deep depression, he sits near the desk, his back to the door.*]

[*Anita, mischievous and provocative, comes softly back, carrying her bag. She takes the négligée from the little table and carries it, with the bag, to the large table.*]

ANITA

Adam!

[*Adam, in a momentary hopefulness, gets up and stands looking at her imploringly. She is carefully folding the garment for her bag.*]

Do you know why this isn't in my bag?

ADAM

No.

ANITA

Well, you never will. There's a lot of things you never'll know, Adam.

MARY ELLEN

Speak up, Adam. Don't let her go like this.

[*She turns to leave them.*]

ANITA

Oh! don't leave us alone, Aunt Mary Ellen! Please!

[*Mary Ellen smilingly goes off to her bedroom, and Anita, calling, continues to address her.*]

He's nothing to say to me anybody couldn't hear. It takes an audience to bring him out. He can speak very nicely before a crowd. He proposed yesterday—to father. And Mr. Buell was there and Mrs. Coleman was there and—oh, I don't know how many. And—oh, yes, I was there too.

ADAM

[*Aware that he is being chaffed, yet unequal to it.*]

Nita!

ANITA

Aunt Mary Ellen!

[*Mary Ellen comes from her bedroom and Anita carries the négligée to her.*]

I don't believe I'll take this after all. If I leave it, I may have to come back for it. I might come Tuesday.

ADAM

[*In reviving hope.*]

Tuesday?

ANITA

[*To Mary Ellen, and carefully ignoring Adam.*]

Next Tuesday. That's father's busy day. To get this. And to see you, Aunt Mary Ellen.

MARY ELLEN

That's a good girl.

[*She takes the garment into her bedroom.*]

ADAM

Tuesday? Mayn't I come?

ANITA

What's the use? Mr. Buell won't be here and father won't be here.

[*Calling.*]

Next Tuesday, Aunt Mary Ellen. Don't forget.

AARON

[*Calling from the carry-all.*]

Come, Nita.

ADAM

Mayn't I ride down to the station?

ANITA

There's an extra seat—with father.

[*She goes out laughing, and Adam, beginning at last to understand, runs after her.*]

[*Mary Ellen comes from her bedroom and goes at once toward the door to the kitchen. Jane opens the door and comes in with a tray of dishes. For a moment they regard each other gravely, and then Jane sets the tray on the table, spreads the cloth and arranges cups and plates.*]

MARY ELLEN

Jane, what are we goin' to say to one another?

JANE

You don't need to say anything.

MARY ELLEN

All these months I thought I was takin' care o' you, an' now you've took care o' me. You give up your good name to save mine.

JANE

I ain't got any good name.

MARY ELLEN

You stood by me when you might ha' thought the worst.

JANE

I know what you be.

MARY ELLEN

But you've got to know the whole. He's dearer'n my life to me. I've told him so. It's true. An' I ain't sorry I went—I'm glad. An' I shall be glad all the days o' my life—glad I went an' glad I came back.

JANE

That's right. You be glad. You ain't dead like me. He an' I are as dead to one another as if we're underground. An' so it's been for years.

MARY ELLEN

Jane, last night somethin' took me off the earth an' set me in the heavens. An' then I see the earth as 'twas meant to be—an' how we've got to live on it an' not do wrong.

JANE

I guess you won't do—any hurt.

MARY ELLEN

I sha'n't forget how the heavens look. I sha'n't stop bein' happy. But some way or another the rest o' my life's goin' to be for you—an' him. And how it's goin' to be—whether I'd ought to go away some-

wheres or stay right on here—I dunno yet. You're the one to tell.

JANE

[*In alarm.*]

You ain't goin' away?

MARY ELLEN

Jane, what be I goin' to do? You tell me.

JANE

Do you know what I want? I didn't know last night, but I know now. To have you two back ag'in. You stay right here in this house an' let me stay with you. An' we'll work. An' you'll keep the devil out o' me. An' Peter Hale'll come here an' eat. An' I'll see to the house down there. An' that's all.

MARY ELLEN

Is that what you want, too?

JANE

That's all I want. Here. With you. Quiet. Touch me.

[*She stretches out her hand timidly and imploringly, and Mary Ellen takes it and puts it to her cheek. But Jane snatches Mary Ellen's hand to her lips and kisses it. Then in a full, almost happy voice.*]

Now I'll make some new coffee.

[*She goes out to the kitchen, and Mary Ellen sinks into a chair and sits there musing.*]

[*Peter comes in at the hall door.*]

PETER

You been talkin'?

MARY ELLEN

Yes.

PETER

She's a good woman.

MARY ELLEN

She's somethin' better'n that.

PETER

Yes.

[*To himself, musingly.*]

A good woman.

MARY ELLEN

She wants to go right on, same's we've been goin'. An' she seems to know we *can* go on. You an' I know it—but she knows it, too.

[*Peter nods, turns away for a minute, then turns back as if taking up everyday life.*]

PETER

What you goin' to do to-day?

MARY ELLEN

Oh, git the rooms in order. Stir up some cake. What you goin' to do?

PETER

I thought mebbe I'd bring another load o' loam an' put it on your long beds.

MARY ELLEN

Ain't it wonderful to have things to do?

PETER

I'm goin' to take some measurements, too, an' see if I can't git you in another cupboard by the pantry door.

MARY ELLEN

Jane'll like that, too.

[*She opens the shutters and the sun, streaming in, rests on the vase of apple blossoms and on her.*]

Peter, ain't it bright! I didn't think the day was gittin' on so fast.

[*Peter compares his watch with the clock.*]

How's the clock?

PETER

[*Smiling at her.*]

'Bout right.

[*He steps into the pantry and begins measuring the wall space.*]

MARY ELLEN

Anyways, we're goin' with the sun.

[*She stands a moment smiling and then begins singing softly to herself the tune "Come, Lasses and Lads".*]

CURTAIN.

SONGS FOR ACT II

THE APPLE SONG

[*Tune: "Come, Lasses and Lads"*]

O here's to the health
And here's to the wealth
Of apple tree bark and bough!
O bloom and O fruit
And O mothering root,
We're hailing you, blessing you now!
O Baldwin and Sweet and Spy!
O Hubbardston, hanging high!
May you dance and blow
And swing and grow
And fall for us by and bye!

EARLY ONE MORNING

Early one morning, just as the sun was rising,
I fared afield, singing the apple trees a-blow.
Woven on Spring's loom,
Pink bloom and white bloom:
O ye flow'rs of May, why drift ye downward like the snow?

Gone are the months when ye stood there bare and bowerless,
Before the birds built, or the streamlets did flow.
Woven on Spring's loom,
Pink bloom and white bloom:
O ye flow'rs of May, why drift ye downward like the snow?

Dream ye of days when the painted fruit is red'ning?
And would ye now waste your sweet beauties, to grow?
Woven on Spring's loom,
Pink bloom and white bloom:
O ye flow'rs of May, why drift ye downward like the snow?

So did I sing as the early sun was rising,
And loud the birds quired to the apple trees a-blow.
Woven on Spring's loom,
Pink bloom and white bloom:
O ye flow'rs of May, why drift ye downward like the snow?

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To *"Summer Is Icumen In"* the old English words are sung.

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